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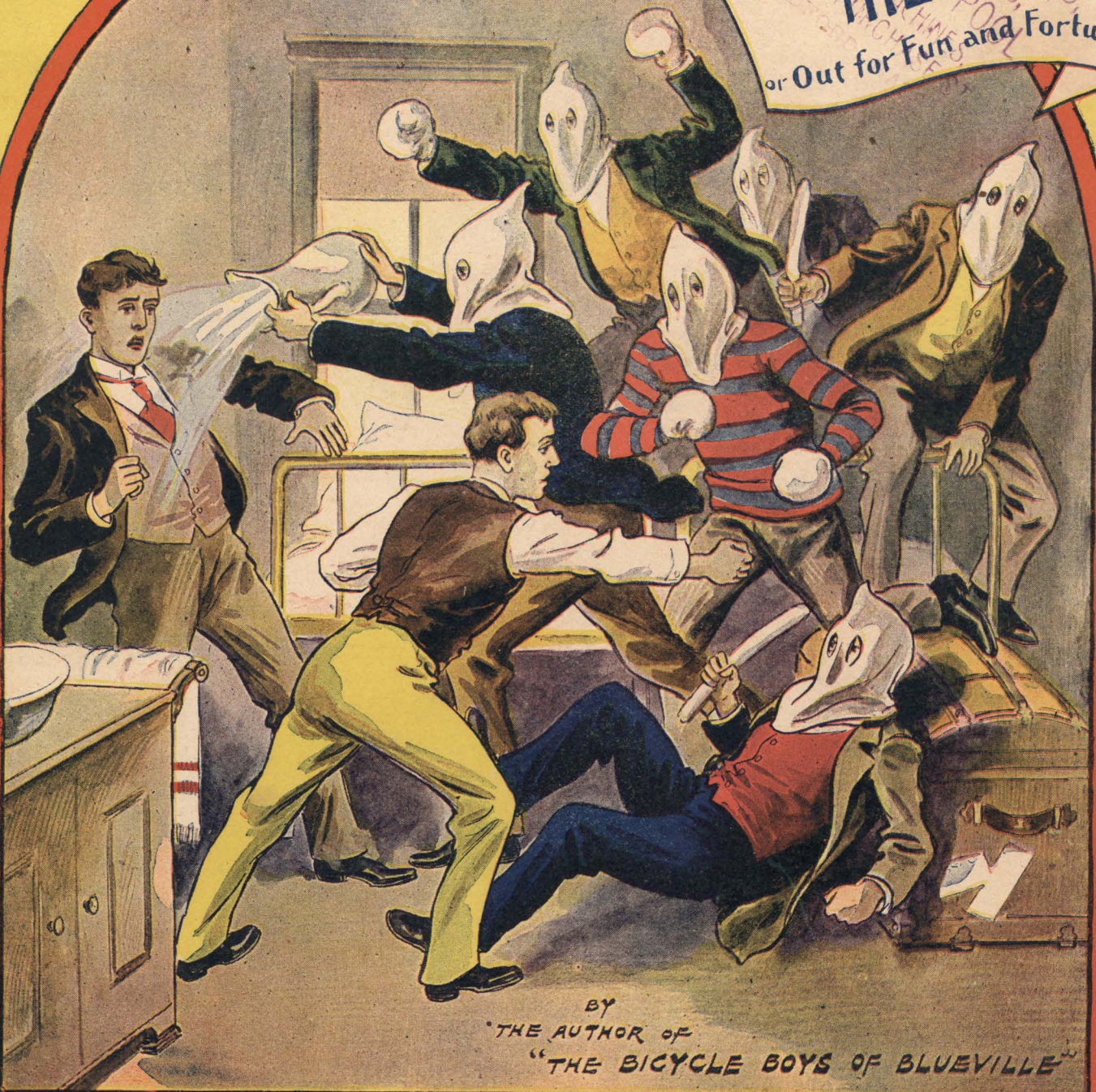
FIVE CENTS

BRAVE AND BOLD

A DIFFERENT COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK

No 35

THE LIFE OF
THE SCHOOL
or Out for Fun and Fortune



BY
"THE AUTHOR OF
"THE BICYCLE BOYS OF BLUEVILLE"

Lou struck out at one of his assailants, and had the extreme satisfaction of seeing him tumble to the floor.

BRAVE & BOLD

A Different Complete Story Every Week

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1903, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C. STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 35.

NEW YORK, August 22, 1903.

Price Five Cents.

THE LIFE OF THE SCHOOL;

OR,

Out for Fun and Fortune.

By the author of "THE BICYCLE BOYS OF BLUEVILLE."

CHAPTER I.

THE TWO WILLS.

"Lou, I am going to send you to boarding school."

"Send me to boarding school! Why, I thought you told me only last week that my school days were over."

"So I did, but I've changed my mind. I think it will be necessary for you to spend a year at some good school and then go to college."

The speakers—a man of sixty and a boy of sixteen—gazed at each other in silence for a moment, and then the former went on:

"I find, by reading one of your father's last letters, that it was his wish that you should be well educated before you entered our office, and so I have made arrangements to place you under the charge of Prof. Haggard, of the Benley Academy, Benley, Massachusetts."

A look of pleasure shone from the eyes of Lou Ashfield—for that was the boy's name—as he heard these words.

He had thought it strange six weeks before when his uncle advised him to come to the office of his banking house and learn the business under his tuition.

Lou's father had been buried a short time before this, and as his mother had died when he was but an infant, he was an orphan—placed under the guardianship of his uncle, Theodore Johnson, at his father's request.

The boy's father had died a rich man, and Lou's interests were all in the hands of his Uncle Theodore.

He was the only child, and when he became twenty-one he would be the possessor of over a million.

No wonder he thought it strange, then, that his uncle should advise him to leave school and come into the office as a clerk.

But Lou had not objected to this, and for six weeks he had regularly put in six hours a day at a desk.

At the time our story opens the office was just about to close for the day, and Lou was in the act of putting on his coat and hat when the conversation started.

"I am glad you desire me to go to a boarding school in order to fit me for a college course, uncle," said the boy.

"Just suits you, then?" returned his uncle, rubbing his hands and showing signs of great satisfaction. "You can start as soon as you like, Lou, as all the arrangements are made."

"Very well; I will go on Monday morning."

"Purchase whatever you need, and don't be afraid to ask for enough money to carry you through."

"Thank you, uncle."

The two now parted, Lou going out into the street, and Theodore Johnson remaining in the office of the banking house, saying he had an important paper to examine.

Soon all the bookkeepers and clerks were gone, and then Johnson was alone in his office.

He was seated with his back to the huge safe, which was still open.

Suddenly he turned around, and producing a key, unlocked a drawer in the safe.

From this he took two legal-looking documents, and held them up before him.

Both bore the same inscription, which was as follows:

"LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF RICHARD ASHFIELD."

"The original and the one I forged," muttered Johnson. "People little dream that Richard Ashfield desired Jacob Borden to be the guardian of his son, and that I forged a document appointing myself. They are also not aware of the fact that, according to the will I fixed up, my son will become heir to his property in case Lou Ashfield dies without issue. The original will, which Ashfield made in his right mind a year ago, is now in my hand, and so is the forged one. The genuine article should be destroyed at once, and I guess I will do it now, or something might turn up to spoil my neat little plot."

Johnson opened the documents, and making sure which was the one he intended to destroy, lighted a match.

Before he could touch the flame to the document, however, the janitor of the building hurried in, with a stranger close at his heels.

"Mr. Johnson," said the janitor, "here is a gentleman who wants to see you on important business. He insisted on coming straight to your office."

The banker quickly thrust the two documents in the pocket of his coat, and picking up the stump of a cigar from his desk, used the burning match to light it.

Then he put out his hand and shook that of the stranger warmly.

"You can go, Jarvis," said he to the janitor.

The moment the two men were alone the banker closed and locked the door.

"Sit down, Hamilton."

The stranger obeyed.

"Have you seen the boy?"

"I have. I followed him a block, and studied him carefully. I could pick him out of a thousand boys of his age and size."

"Well, here is the school he is going to. You know your duty; he is never to return alive."

As Johnson spoke he handed the man called Hamilton a card containing the name and address of the boarding school Lou Ashfield was to start for on Monday.

"I know what to do exactly," returned the stranger, with a smile of the utmost confidence. "The boy is in your way, and while at school he will die a natural death, or else he will be accidentally drowned in a lake, or perhaps he will fall out of a tree and break his neck. Know my duty! I guess I do. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not so loud, Hamilton!" cried the banker, uneasily.

"That is all right," said the villain, coolly. "This will not be the first piece of dirty work I've done for you. Hand over five hundred as a sort of retainer."

Without a word Johnson turned and knelt before the open safe, and, as he did so, the real will and the forged document dropped from his pocket to the floor of the office.

With a catlike movement Hamilton stepped forward and picked them up, and while Johnson was counting out the five hundred dollars to satisfy his demand he opened them and hastily scanned their contents.

As he was in league with Johnson, he, of course, knew something of his business, and it took him but an instant to see how it was that Lou Ashfield's uncle came to be his guardian.

With the quickness of a professional pickpocket he placed the forged will on Johnson's desk, and thrust the genuine one in his own pocket!

He had scarcely succeeded in doing this when the banker turned with a roll of bills in his hand.

"Here you are, Hamilton!" he hoarsely exclaimed. "For God's sake, do your work well! I will put you in the way of becoming a rich man if you do."

"Have no fear, Mr. Johnson," replied Hamilton, stroking his heavy brown mustache complacently. "Thanks for the retainer. I must be off now. Before the end of next week I will be in the immediate neighborhood of Benley Academy. So long!"

The hired tool of the plotting scoundrel bowed with a sort of mock politeness, and, without troubling the banker, unlocked the office door and passed out.

A few minutes later he was seated at a table in the corner of a saloon, busily engaged in reading the document he had so neatly stolen.

Carefully he read it over, word for word, and at the conclusion he nodded his head in a satisfied manner and exclaimed:

"So the will of Richard Ashfield that Theodore Johnson is working under is a forged one, is it? Well, this was a lucky find for me! I have the genuine will, and after I have disposed of the boy I will hold this to make the old man plank down a five hundred whenever I want it. Here's success to the whole scheme!"

CHAPTER II.

THE ARRIVAL AT THE SCHOOL.

On the Monday morning following the interview with his uncle, Lou Ashfield set out for the Benley Academy.

The distance necessitated a journey by rail of eight or nine hours, and a fifteen minutes' ride in the school stage.

It was in early September, and the weather was balmy and pleasant.

When our hero took his seat in one of the railway coaches he felt very happy.

He anticipated a pleasant time at Benley, for from the description it was a first-class school, situated in one of the most beautiful and healthful parts of the State.

The majority of the passengers in the coach were adults, but the boy soon sighted a young fellow about his own age, seated in the rear end of the car, who had a traveling satchel and a number of bundles stowed near him.

Before ten miles had been covered the two were conversing as though they had known each other a long time.

Much to Lou's satisfaction, he found that the boy was bound for the same place as himself, and was going to attend the Benley Academy.

His name was Harry Hitcher, and one look at his face was enough to convince any one that he was possessed of an honest and manly disposition.

As the conversation progressed the boys found that their tastes and desires ran in about the same channel, for both were fond of their books, as well as athletic sports.

Both of them might have been taken to be two years older than they were, for they were large for their age, and as stout and well built as any two young fellows that could be sighted in a day's travel.

It was well toward nightfall when the train slowed up and came to a standstill at the depot in the little village of Benley.

There were few passengers to get off besides the two boys, and when they stepped upon the platform with their satchels and bundles, they were almost immediately accosted by a stout, red-faced man who wore a wide-brimmed felt hat and carried a whip.

"This way, young gentlemen, if you are goin' ter ther Benley 'Cademy!" he exclaimed. "I'll look after your trunks."

"Thank you," returned Lou, slipping a quarter in his hand. "See that everything is all right, will you?"

The fellow tipped his hat and then darted off toward the baggage car, leaving them standing on the platform.

"That is a comical-looking fellow," observed Harry Hitcher, as the two waited upon the platform. "I'll bet lots of fun can be had out of him."

"I guess you are right," retorted Lou. "My! but he is a powerful man, though!"

The driver of the academy stage was approaching, carrying a trunk on each shoulder, where they had been placed by the baggage men.

And when he deposited them near the waiting stage he did it as easily as though they were but a couple of small baskets.

The next minute he had placed the trunks upon the vehicle, and then our hero and Harry Hitcher got inside and the horses set off at a rapid trot down a dusty road.

The sun was just setting behind a piece of picturesque woodland when the driver brought the horses to a halt in front of a large stone building that had an octagon tower running up from its east end.

Not a human being came in sight until the two boys had alighted from the vehicle, and then one of the massive doors in the center of the building opened, and an old man, who was as straight as an arrow, and whose hair and beard were as white as snow, came out.

"Welcome to Benley Academy!" said he, putting on his glasses and waving his hands after the fashion of some great after-dinner speaker. "Young gentlemen, I am Prof. Haggard."

Lou and Harry bowed politely, and then introduced themselves.

The professor led the way inside the building to the reception-room, and after a five-minutes' speech, being solely upon the good qualities of his school, he called a servant and had them shown to their sleeping quarters.

Up to the top story they were conducted, and then along a narrow passage till they came to a door with No. 43 painted on its surface.

Unlike the majority of schools, the Benley Academy did not have dormitories for the pupils to sleep in.

Prof. Haggard thought they would get along better by putting two in a room.

There was in the neighborhood of a hundred rooms in the building, which were divided from each other by thin board partitions that did not reach to within two feet of the ceiling.

The professor never so much as thought that the boys could easily climb to the top of the partitions, and go from one room to the other if they desired.

And this they did, too, liking the arrangement much better than dormitories.

"Here's where you young gentlemen are to stop," observed the servant, opening the door. "Your trunks and things will be brought right up. The professor says you are to wash and come down to supper."

"Did you say supper?" asked Lou.

"Of course he did. That's what we have every night—breakfast at seven in the morning, dinner at twelve and supper at six in the evening."

"Oh, that is how it is? Well, you can tell the professor we will be right down."

As soon as they were alone the boys looked at each other in a questioning manner.

"What do you think of it?" asked Harry.

"Not much," replied Lou.

"It strikes me that my governor made a mistake in sending me to this school."

"You can hardly tell yet."

"That's so; but I wouldn't be afraid to wager a cent that the professor is a regular hog in manners, and that he don't know any more than he ought to."

Lou shrugged his shoulders.

"I must confess that I am of the same opinion as you," said he.

"Well, let's wash up and go down. That was pretty good in the servant telling us to wash ourselves—just as if we didn't know enough to do it."

"Probably they have some dirty customers here."

A minute later Lou was busy with the washbowl and pitcher, Harry having signified his desire to wait until his companion got through.

The room was about twelve by nine, and contained two beds, two closets, two chairs and a washstand.

It was not particularly inviting, but the boys did not mind this much.

Fifteen minutes later they started downstairs to see about getting the supper they had been promised.

As they reached the lower hallway they passed a door marked "Private," which was nearly half open.

They could not help seeing part of the interior of the apartment, and the instant they did so the boys came to a stand.

And no wonder! They beheld Prof. Haggard bending over their trunks, which he had opened in some manner.

One by one he sorted over their contents and then placed them back.

Then he turned his attention to the satchels and bundles.

In one of these Lou had a box of choice candy, and, to his surprise and dismay, he saw the professor open it, taste the contents, and then place the box in a drawer of his desk.

"The old thief!" exclaimed Harry Hitcher, in a whisper.

"I'll fix him," said Lou, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

He produced an orange from his pocket, and taking aim, hurled it at the old man with all his might.

It struck him squarely in the back of the neck, and caused him to topple over head first into one of the open trunks.

Then Lou and Harry ran noiselessly to the other end of the hallway and walked leisurely into an apartment, which they found to be the dining-room.

CHAPTER III.

HAZED.

"Help! Murder! Thieves!"

It was Prof. Haggard who uttered the cry.

The orange being a trifle more than ripe, the skin had bursted when it struck him, and the pulp spread over the back of his neck, some of it going down his shirt collar.

When he felt this and found himself head downward in the open trunk he thought it was really a burglar who had entered the room and struck him with a club.

"Save me!" he screamed; "I am mortally wounded, for I can feel the blood trickling down my back. Murder—murder!"

The next minute a servant rushed in, followed by a crowd of boys, who had been gathered in the rear of the building.

With the swoop of an avalanche they shot into the professor's private study, whence the cries came.

Then a shout of laughter went up as they beheld the old gentleman standing on his head in the trunk.

Lou and Harry from the door of the dining-room heard it, and immediately ran back to see the fun.

When they arrived they saw the servant who had conducted them to their room in the act of pulling the old candy thief from the trunk.

It was just about dusk, and they mixed in with the crowd of schoolboys without being recognized as newcomers.

When the professor got upon his feet and realized that he was not hurt, but the victim of a practical joke, he seized a cane from the rack and went into the boys right and left.

Our two young friends scampered away with the rest, and a few minutes later they were calmly seated at a table in the dining-room, eating a cold lunch the cook provided them with.

While thus engaged the professor entered.

He had undergone a wash and wore a clean collar, but his feelings were still somewhat ruffled.

"Boys," said he, "as soon as you are through with the supper you can go direct to your rooms, and stay there until to-morrow morning at six o'clock, when the bell will ring. This is a general order to-night, and you newcomers will have to abide by the rule."

"When will our trunks and baggage be sent up?" questioned Lou, with a twinkle in his eyes. "There are some things in our trunks we will need before we retire for the night."

"Your baggage has gone up to your room long ago."

With these words the old man started to leave the room.

"One moment, professor," exclaimed Lou; "I have a box of choice candy in my baggage, and I should like to offer it to you as a token of the good feelings I have toward you. Will you allow me to go and get the box?"

"I do not eat candy!" was the stern rejoinder, and the face of the speaker turned several colors in as many seconds. "Here, Daggs, conduct Masters Ashfield and Hitcher to their room at once!"

Though the boys had scarcely finished the frugal repast set before them, they were forced to get up from the table when the man called Daggs approached.

"Come, young gentlemen, move!" he said, jerking his thumb toward the door.

When Lou and Harry reached Room 43 they found their trunks and baggage there, looking as though they had never been tampered with.

"Here you are," observed Daggs, depositing a lighted lamp on the dusty shelf that posed as a mantelpiece; "remember that all lights must be out when the clock strikes nine."

"All right," said Harry; "you go out, now, please."

The servant made no reply, but with a grin stepped out into the passageway, and, closing the door with a bang, locked it from the outside.

"I guess we will have to stay here till six o'clock whether we want to or not," remarked Lou.

"Yes; I don't fancy this sort of treatment, especially when we have not been an hour in the place," responded Harry.

"Perhaps we will like it more after we become better acquainted. I have no doubt we will find some very good fellows among the scholars."

"And some bad ones, too."

"Oh, of course; everything can't run along smoothly. We have got to take the bitter with the sweet."

"So long as the 'sweet' is in the majority I shall not kick," and producing a key, Harry bent over his trunk to unlock it.

He was close to the partition at the time, and before he could get the key into the lock he was drenched to the skin by a pail of water.

"Whew!" gasped the astonished boy, springing to his feet and looking wildly about him. "Who did that?"

A burst of subdued laughter from the next room followed his remark, and then both boys knew where the water came from.

The inmates of the school were having some fun with them.

Lou was forced to laugh at his dripping companion, but the next minute he changed his tune.

A sponge soaked with red ink struck him squarely on the bosom of his shirt and spattered all over him.

"I say, there!" he called out, angrily, "fun is fun, but don't ruin a fellow's clothes."

Lou had lost his temper, and this was evidently just what their tormentors wanted, for in a remarkably short space of time a dozen boys came scrambling over the partition and dropped lightly to the floor.

Their faces were covered with white masks to conceal their identity, and each carried something in his hand.

Some had stuffed clubs, others wet rags and sponges, and two of them had boxing gloves on their hands.

The minute they got into the little room they began buffeting Lou and Harry about right and left, and the place being crowded with their disguised tormentors, the two boys had little chance to dodge the blows.

Biff!—biff! Boff!—boff! they were getting it so hard that they finally lost their tempers in spite of themselves.

The two boys of the hazing party who wore the boxing gloves were slightly taller than either Lou or Harry, and it was they who were kicking up the most of the unpleasantness.

They were pelting the new arrivals unmercifully. Harry's nose was bleeding profusely, and Lou felt sure he would have a black eye in the morning.

"Let up now or I'll hit back!" exclaimed the latter, as he received a heavy blow under the chin that sent him against the wall with a bang.

A roar of laughter followed the boy's remark as the hazers realized how absurd the threat was.

But, anyhow, Lou struck out at one of his assailants, and had the extreme satisfaction of seeing him tumble to the floor.

Harry followed his example, and the other fellow who was manipulating the boxing gloves so readily went down.

Just then two pails of water were handed over from an adjoining room, and before our friends could dodge their contents struck them squarely in their faces, and, gasping and sputtering, they staggered and fell to the floor.

Half blinded, they arose to their feet, and then they observed their tormentors clambering over the partition like so many cats.

Enraged, Lou and Harry made a dash to grab some of them.

At that moment the door opened and Prof. Haggard and one of his assistants rushed into the room.

Neither Lou nor Harry recognized them, and with remarkable quickness they sprang upon the newcomers and began raining heavy blows upon them.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE PLAYGROUND.

Whack! whack! The two boys were pounding the newcomers with all the power they could command, and, taken completely by surprise, the professor and his assistant made no resistance.

For the space of several seconds this continued, and then, with a cry of rage, the professor seized Harry by the collar.

"You murderous young hounds!" he cried, "do you mean to kill us? I promise you you will suffer for this in the morning!"

"Professor, I believe my nose is bleeding," spoke up the assistant.

"And mine, too," returned his superior. "Boys, put that light out and get into bed!"

As quickly as they had entered the two men took their departure, not even asking what had caused all the noise and confusion a few minutes before.

"Things are growing worse instead of better," observed Lou. "I had no idea it was the professor we were pounding. I suppose we will catch it in the morning."

"It is pretty early, but I suppose we will have to turn in and wait developments," said Harry. "I don't believe the hazers will bother us any more to-night."

Lou glanced at his watch and saw that it was near nine o'clock.

Just as they were going to put out the light they heard a noise on the other side of the partition.

Looking up, they beheld two boys leaning over it and peering at them.

"Say! you two are what we call bang-up fellows!" exclaimed one of them in a loud whisper.

"You are right," added the other. "My! didn't you soak it into old Hag and Lemons, though! It did us good. We didn't know you were such good fellows or we'd have let up a little on the hazing."

These remarks put Lou and Harry in excellent humor.

A few minutes later they were engaged in a whispered conversation with the occupants of the next room.

They learned that their names were Scofield and Dixon, and became convinced they were good fellows.

While they were talking the clock in the tower tolled the hour of nine.

"Out with the light!" exclaimed Scofield; "good-night, fellows! We'll meet in the morning!"

A minute later our young friends were in their cots, and total darkness reigned.

Owing to their new surroundings and the unpleasant occurrences of the night before, Lou and Harry did not sleep well.

They were up some time before Daggs, the servant, came around and unlocked the doors, so the scholars could come downstairs.

"You must have been raisin' ther dickins in here last night," remarked the man, as he peered into the room.

"What is that to you?" asked Lou.

"Don't get impudent," said Daggs. "I suppose I've got a right to ask a question."

"Ask yourself to mind your own business, then," spoke up Harry, who chipped in to help Lou worry the servant a little, and take some of the freshness out of him.

"You fellers have got too much cheek for new boys. If you don't treat me right I'll report you," and Daggs held up his finger to add stress to his remark.

"Get out of here!" exclaimed Lou, throwing a pillow and striking him in the face with it.

"That's it!" and Harry let another one drive.

Daggs no longer lingered. He was a big, burly man, but a coward withal; and besides, he dared not lay hands on one of the scholars.

The boys threw the pillows back into the room and then made their way downstairs.

They went out of the rear door when they reached the ground floor, and found themselves in the playground of the academy.

A number of boys were already gathered there, and when our hero and his friend appeared they instantly crowded around them.

"The new boys!" exclaimed half a dozen in a breath.

They stood the looks that were cast at them unflinchingly, and after a couple of minutes' silence Lou exclaimed:

"Well, what do you fellows think of us?"

"Not much," replied a tall boy, whose eye was blackened and whose face was badly swollen.

Our hero was just about to make a reply when the bell rang to assemble the scholars in the chapel for prayers.

Lou and Harry followed the rest, and when the short service was over the boys made a rush for the dining-room.

After breakfast Prof. Haggard sent for the two new scholars, saying he desired to talk to them in his study.

"Mebbe you'll catch it now," said Daggs, who was the one who bore the message.

"If you don't keep your mouth shut, you will catch it," replied Lou, throwing the piece of a crust of bread into the servant's open mouth.

Then the two boys hurried to the professor's study.

The door was ajar, so they walked boldly in.

"Good-morning, professor!" both exclaimed, as if in one voice. A scowl was the only reply they got.

Finally the professor cleared his throat and said:

"I had my mind made up to punish you for your extraordinary conduct last night, but, as you are fresh arrivals, I will remit it. However, I want to say a few words to you in reference to the rules and regulations of the academy, and the instant you violate any of them you will be liable to a severe punishment."

He then proceeded to explain in detail just what they would have to abide by while they were inmates of the school, and when he had finished told them they might go to the playground.

Lou and Harry walked out, well satisfied that the professor, or "Hag," as the boys called him, was a peculiar sort of man.

When they got into the playground they were immediately accosted by two boys, one of whom was the fellow who said he did not think much of them a short time before.

"Well, what can we do for you fellows?" questioned Harry.

"I'll tell you what you can't do for us," replied the boy with the black eye; "you knocked me down last night when we were hazing you, but you can't do it now."

"No," spoke up the other fellow. "If you think you can, toss up a cent to see who is to have the first trial."

"A fight—a fight!" yelled the crowd of youngsters. "The Haddock brothers are going to do up the new boys!"

"If we have got to fight I suppose we must," said Harry, coolly.

"That is the way to talk!" exclaimed Lou, throwing off his coat.

CHAPTER V.

TWO FIGHTS.

The Haddock brothers, Tom and Will, were the bullies of the Benley School. Aged sixteen and seventeen, respectively, they were big, muscular and raw-boned.

Neither of them was very handsome, and the head of each was crowned with a crop of sandy red hair.

There was not a boy among the scholars of the academy who did not fear them when it came to a game of fisticuffs, and no wonder the crowd became excited and interested when the two new boys showed their willingness to stand up before them.

Tom, who sported the black eye and swollen countenance, was nearly half a head taller than Lou Ashfield, and not quite so heavy, while his brother Will was more stocky and heavier than Harry Hitcher.

There was hardly a boy in the crowd who did not expect to see the new arrivals get a good thrashing at the hands of the bullies, and some of them even went so far as to make pitying remarks.

It was very quickly decided that the bout between Lou and Tom

Haddock should take place first, so a ring was immediately formed.

With their coats and hats off, the two boys faced each other.

There was a confident smile on the face of the bully, while our hero looked almost as pale as death.

The crowd thought this signified that he was afraid, and a murmur went up to that effect.

But Lou was not the least bit afraid. There was not a drop of cowardly blood in him, and he resolved either to subdue Tom Haddock or take a thrashing without complaining.

"Are you ready?" exclaimed the other Haddock boy, who had appointed himself master of ceremonies.

"Yes!" came the reply from both boys.

"Go ahead, then!"

The bully made a dive for Lou, evidently with the intention of wiping him out in one rush.

But he made a grand mistake. Lou stepped nimbly aside and struck him a heavy blow on the side of the head as he passed.

Down went Tom Haddock flat upon the ground.

A low murmur of surprise went up from the academy boys, while Harry Hitcher emitted an exclamation of satisfaction.

Our hero now felt sure that he could handle his opponent, and, with unchanged countenance, he waited for him to get upon his feet.

Dazed and confounded, the bully scrambled to an upright position.

"Go for him, Tom!" cried his brother; "that was only a chance blow he gave you. Let him know where you live!"

With a cry like that of a savage bull, Tom did go for Lou, but again he missed.

"Stand up and fight like a man!" he hissed; "this is no sprinting match."

Lou made no reply, but, suddenly changing his tactics, he forced the fighting, landing three blows upon the bully's face and neck, one after the other.

"Whew!" exclaimed Scofield to Dixon, his roommate, "I guess the Haddocks have met their Waterloo this day."

"One of them has, beyond the question of a doubt. My! there he goes to the dust again."

This was true. For the second time Lou sent the bully reeling to the ground.

As yet our brave young friend had only received one blow on the face, and that had been but a glancing one.

He was just as fresh as he was at the start, too, while his opponent was getting very badly used up.

But Tom Haddock was not altogether a coward. He meant to do his very best to keep the honors he had held for the past few months, and though this was the toughest fight he had ever experienced, he had hopes of winning yet.

He resolved to go in it rough-and-tumble when he scrambled to his feet the second time, and, lowering his head, he made a rush at Lou, intending to butt him in the stomach.

Then it was that something happened which caused the crowd to break into a shout of applause.

Divining his opponent's foul intention, Lou leaped high into the air, his feet landing fairly upon Tom Haddock's back when he came down.

With crushing force the bully went down, plowing the earth with his nose as he did so.

As he did not offer to get up, his brother hastened to his assistance.

"Are you hurt, Tom?" he asked.

"Yes, Will; I can't fight any more to-day."

He was assisted to his feet, and then, fixing his eyes upon our hero, he said:

"You got the best of me this time, but I'll get even—see if I don't!"

"If you are going to hold the grudge I can't help it," replied Lou. "I am sure it is all your own fault."

"Never you mind; the next time I tackle you it will be different."

Tom was led off to the pump, and then his brother pulled off his coat and hat.

"I am ready to try you," said he, looking at Harry. "I'll see if I can't have a little better luck than my brother did."

"If you are anxious for a thrashing I believe I am capable of giving it to you, unless you are a much better fighter than your brother," was Harry's cool rejoinder.

Half a minute later they stepped into the center of the ring.

Lou gave the word and they started in.

Will was a much better fighter than his brother, but he was not so plucky.

He gave Harry a couple of good ones before he got hit on the nose and sent to the ground.

Then he cried "enough!" while the schoolboys howled in derision.

At this juncture Mr. Humber, the head teacher, appeared on the scene.

"This is disgraceful!" he shouted. "Stop it instantly!"

"It is all over, sir; you were a trifle too late," said Lou, taking Harry by the arm and leading him toward the pump.

"Do not be insolent, young man," observed the teacher. "If it were not that you are a new boy I would report you to the professor. As it is, I shall report you as one of the principals in this disgraceful fight."

Our two friends washed themselves at the pump, and then put on their coats and hats.

The defeated Haddock brothers walked off with some of their sympathizing friends, but the majority of the boys hung about Lou and Harry, quite anxious to become better acquainted with them.

Both boys were of the kind that make friends very quickly, and as Scofield and Dixon offered to introduce them, they were soon busy shaking hands with their schoolfellows.

"Can you fellows play ball?" asked Scofield.

"A little," replied Lou. "I used to pitch a pretty fair game."

"And I was captain of a nine in Boston," added Harry.

"What position did you play?" questioned Dixon.

"Catcher, mostly."

"Good!" exclaimed Scofield. "You two are just the fellows we want to complete the Benley nine. Hurrah, fellows! if Ashfield and Hitcher can play ball as well as they can put up their dukes, we will be able to win back the two games we lost from the Fentons before the season is over."

While the boys were talking over the matter the school bell rang.

CHAPTER VI.

CANDIES AND SNUFF.

As the boys filed into the schoolroom after the ringing of the bell, Lou and Harry were met by Prof. Haggard, who informed them that they were to step into the examination room.

They followed him into a little apartment just off the schoolroom, and sat down.

A moment later Mr. Humber, or, as the boys called him, Lemons, came in.

"I wish you would examine these boys and place them in their proper classes," observed the professor.

"Very well, sir," returned the head teacher; "I will proceed at once."

The examination lasted nearly an hour, and when it was completed the boys were satisfied that Lemons was smarter than he looked. In fact, they concluded that he knew just about four times as much as the professor.

A few minutes later they were marched into the big school-room, and being pretty well advanced in their studies, they were placed in one of the higher classes.

And so their school days at Benley had now fairly begun.

When the time came for the dismissal for the dinner hour the professor arose and said:

"Thomas and William Haddock and Ashfield and Hitcher will remain seated until the others have gone out."

The little bell tinkled and two minutes later the professor and the four boys he had named were alone in the room.

"Masters Haddock, once more I am compelled to punish you for your disgraceful conduct. Fighting appears to be your principal enjoyment. This time I am going to punish you more severely than I ever did before. You will not be allowed on the playground during this week!"

As Prof. Haggard spoke these words he brought his fist down upon his desk to emphasize them.

"Masters Ashfield and Hitcher, you are excused, as it is your first offense."

Our two young friends immediately got up from their seats, noticing as they did so that the Haddock brothers were scowling fiercely at them.

Acting according to the discipline of the academy, they bowed to the professor and passed out.

A crowd of the scholars were clustered around waiting for the dinner bell, and when it rang, a minute or so later, Lou and Harry joined them in their rush for the dining-room.

They were not overfed, but the food furnished them was pure and wholesome, so as yet neither Harry nor Lou had any real cause for complaint.

After dinner they spent the rest of the noon hour in a practice game of ball, and so well did Lou and Harry pitch and catch that Scofield, the captain of the team, went into ecstasies.

"We are right 'in it' now!" he exclaimed; "we will challenge the Fentons for a game Saturday."

"Who did the pitching for you at the last game?" asked Lou.

"Tom Haddock," was the reply; "he got knocked completely out of the box, and he has made but two base-hits this season."

"It seems rather strange that I am to take the place of that fellow. He will hate me worse than ever now."

"I don't believe he will attempt to thrash you again very soon."

"You bet he won't!" cried a number of the boys.

Owing to the Haddocks being kept out of the playground, Lou and Harry saw very little of them during the balance of the week.

The professor gave his consent to the school nine to play a game with the Fentons on Saturday afternoon, so all the necessary arrangements were made.

It was to be played on the grounds of the latter club, which were situated in the very heart of Fenton, a pleasant little village on the bank of a picturesque river.

Fenton was but three miles from the Benley Academy, and as it was a little too far to walk, Lou was selected to go and ask the professor to let Daggs take them down in the stage.

This was on Saturday morning, and, anxious to please his constituents, our hero boldly made his way to the door of the professor's study.

He knocked gently, and was told to come in.

The next minute he opened the door and discovered Prof. Haggard seated at his desk, with the box of candy he had stolen before him.

The old man was mincing at a French chocolate cream, and when he saw who his visitor was he swallowed the whole of it at a single gulp and hastily threw a newspaper over the box.

Lou did not by word or look show that he saw what the old man had been doing, but, hat in hand, and in a respectful manner, he asked if the nine could have the stage to convey them to and from Fenton that afternoon.

"Certainly, Ashfield—certainly!" exclaimed the professor. "Daggs has nothing whatever to do this afternoon. I hope you will win the game and keep up the reputation of Benley. By the way, I received a letter from your uncle this morning. Let me see; where is it? Ah, I know! I left it on the mantel in the dining-room. I'll go and get it, as there is something in it that greatly concerns you. Sit down, Ashfield."

The old man hurried from the room, and the moment he was out of sight Lou stepped to his desk.

"The mean old hypocrite," he muttered. "He has not finished my candies yet. Hanged if I don't make him sick of them!"

A silver snuff box lay near the box of candy, and in a twinkling the boy opened it and sprinkled a goodly quantity of the snuff over the chocolates.

This done, he placed things just as he had found them, and sat down.

In a minute or two the professor returned with an open letter in his hand.

"Here is what I want to call your attention to, Ashfield," said he. "Listen to this paragraph in your uncle's letter: 'Above all things, I desire you to make my nephew conform strictly to the rules and regulations of the academy, and in case he does not I desire him to be punished. I want him to be educated for a business man, and discipline is an essential quality in a person who hopes to make a success in business.' How is that, young man?"

"That is right, I suppose, sir."

"Of course it is right. See to it that you do as your uncle desires you to."

"I will do my best, professor."

"Very well, Ashfield. You can go now. I will call Daggs and tell him about the stage."

Lou passed out, thinking very little about his uncle's letter. He thought it quite natural that he should write that way, as any parent or guardian would be liable to express themselves in the same manner.

There was a merry twinkle in his eye as he thought of the trick he had played on the professor, and he hastened to Harry Hitcher to tell him about it.

The boys were waiting for him, and when he told them that the stage would be ready for them after dinner they broke into a cheer.

A few minutes later, just as he had finished telling Harry about the box of candy and the snuff, Daggs, the servant, came running out of the house in an excited manner.

He was running for the stable when the boys intercepted him.

"What's the matter, Daggs?" asked Lou.

"I'm off for ther doctor," was the reply. "Ther professor is awful sick; he's taken with a vomitin' fit!"

The boys exchanged glances, and when the servant was out of hearing they broke into a hearty laugh.

"I am getting square on him for stealing my candies," observed our hero. "Well, it serves him right."

CHAPTER VII.

HAMILTON APPEARS.

By the time Daggs succeeded in getting a physician Prof. Haggard had recovered from his attack, and he had also discovered the cause of his sudden sickness.

He went into a dreadful rage when he found that his stolen sweets had been beautifully sprinkled with the contents of his snuff box.

Of course he knew pretty well who did it, but it would not be policy to punish the boy for his mischievous act, because the box of candy was his property.

Tired and feeble from his short but pronounced spell of sickness, the professor allowed the physician to feel of his pulse and prescribe for him.

He did not want to tell him the cause of the trouble, so he was forced to take two cathartic pills then and there, and promise to repeat the dose that night.

The wise doctor received his fee and took his departure, and then the professor got up from the lounge he had been reclining on and drank a glass of water.

This made him feel better, and, with an exclamation of disgust he threw the rest of the pills into the cuspidor.

"Confound that Ashfield boy," he muttered. "He knows I took the candy from his baggage, and he is doing all he can to square the account with me. I wish I had not touched anything that belonged to him, for somehow I am under the impression that he will put me to no end of trouble during his stay here."

Having delivered himself of these thoughts, the old man walked out on the veranda.

He was just in time to witness the departure of the baseball nine in the stage, and when the boys caught sight of him they gave a hearty cheer.

The professor had half a mind to call them back, just for the sake of punishing Lou, but he thought better of it, and answered their cheer by waving his hand.

When the enthusiastic crowd of boys had disappeared in the distance the professor turned to go into his study for the purpose of drinking a glass of sherry to steady his nerves.

At that moment two boys approached him from the hallway.

They were Tom and Will Haddock.

"What are you doing here, boys?" the old man demanded.

"Please, sir," replied Tom, "we came to ask you if you would suspend our sentence of punishment and allow us to go and see the ball game."

"Yes, you may go!"

The words were spoken so quickly that the Haddock brothers could scarcely believe their senses.

"Thank you, sir," they managed to say; and then they hurried off.

Five minutes later the two bullies who had lost their laurels—if we may use the expression—were walking rapidly in the direction of Fenton.

It was rather a long walk, but they were very anxious to get there, and, boylike, they did not mind it.

"We will see what the new pitcher and catcher will do," observed Will as they walked along.

"If that Ashfield pitches any better game than I can he must be a professional," replied Tom. "There is only one thing I wish, and that is that he loses the game for them."

"And I hope Hitcher has more passed balls than anything else."

"Yes; and I'd like to see Ashfield get hit in the stomach with a liner, and get knocked out so he couldn't play again this season."

"Well," admitted Will, after a minute's thought, "if Ashfield

and Hitcher can play ball as well as they can handle their fists, they will put up a good game."

This remark caused his brother to grow angry.

"Do you mean to say Ashfield whipped me square?" he demanded.

"Well, no, not exactly; but he got the best of you all right."

"Well, Hitcher got the best of you, didn't he?"

"Yes; but he wouldn't have if I hadn't seen Lemons coming and stopped fighting."

Tom laughed in a sneering manner.

"A good excuse," said he.

"Never mind," retorted his brother, "I am going to thrash Harry Hitcher within an inch of his life before he is many days older."

"And I will get square with Lou Ashfield if it takes me as long as I live to do it?"

"Get square with whom, boy?"

The two young rascals started as though a dynamite bomb had exploded near them.

A man, aged about thirty, with a heavy, dark mustache, stood before them.

He had been standing against a tree at the side of the road, and they had been so deeply interested in their conversation that they had failed to notice him until he spoke.

"Wh—ho—who are you?" stammered Tom Haddock, while his brother simply gave a gasp of astonishment.

"My name is Myers," the man returned, with a smile that was reassuring. "I am a stranger in these parts. I happened to hear you mention the name of Ashfield. I am slightly acquainted with a boy of that name, who is at school somewhere in this vicinity."

"Is—is he a friend of yours?" ventured Will.

"Not much he isn't," was the quick reply. The Haddocks breathed a sigh of relief, and, noticing this, the man, who was no other than the villain Hamilton, who had contracted to put Lou Ashfield out of the way, continued:

"He doesn't like me, either, so I simply want to see him without being seen. His uncle sent me down here to learn how he is behaving himself. Can you tell me where I can find him?"

"Yes," exclaimed Tom, "he is going to pitch in a game of ball this afternoon. If you will go along with us you will see him."

"Thank you! I will be glad to go along. How far is it?"

"Oh, not very far. We can get there in twenty minutes from here."

The Haddocks, with their new acquaintance, started off down the road.

Myers, as he chose to call himself, soon got them to like him very much. He treated them to cigars and asked them all about the game of baseball, and they were only too willing to give him all the information he desired.

Finally they told him how Lou and Harry Hitcher had given them a thrashing, and they were encouraged in their desire to get satisfaction.

Hamilton carefully studied the two characters he had fallen in with, and just before the ball field was reached he decided to make Tom Haddock his tool.

He called him aside, and in a whisper said:

"See here, you don't want to see Ashfield win the game for Benley, do you?"

"No, sir, I don't!" retorted the boy, vindictively.

"I have a piece of chewing gum in my pocket, which, if he chews, will make him so dull and sleepy that he will not be able to pitch anything like a good game. In fact, if he chewed the gum long enough it might—"

"I don't care if it kills him!" interrupted Tom. "Give it to me; I'll see that he gets it."

"If he should die during the game it would not be from the effect of the chewing gum—it would be heart disease. He is subject to that, as I happen to know."

"Give me the chewing gum!"

"Here it is, and here is twenty dollars to bet against the Benley nine. Now do your part, and don't say a word about it, even to your brother."

"All right, sir," and with a triumphant glitter in his evil eyes, Tom pocketed the drugged gum and the money.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GAME.

Daggs delivered his load at the Fenton ball grounds at precisely two o'clock.

As the game was advertised to take place at three, both teams had ample time for practice.

Fifteen minutes after their arrival the Benley nine was in the field, and one of them was batting the ball about the field for the benefit of the fielders.

After a few minutes of this sort of work Lou and Harry got off to one side, and with another ball proceeded to get themselves in proper shape for the game.

The Fenton boys watched them sharply, for, as they were new members of the academy team, they attracted considerable attention.

At length they gave up the field to their opponents, and then Scofield gave out his batting list to the scorers.

Promptly at three o'clock the game was ready to start.

An umpire from the village was selected, to the satisfaction of both teams, and the ball was tossed to the pitcher's box.

The Fentons were lucky enough to win the toss, and they, of course, took the field.

The first man at the bat went out on a foul, and the second made a base hit and succeeded in reaching first.

The next to follow was Dixon, and he had the bad luck to strike out.

This made it two out, with small chance of getting a run in.

Capt. Scofield was the next to follow, and, to the joy of his followers, he sent a beautiful fly toward left field.

Away he sped for first base, and just as he reached it a howl went up from the throats of the villagers.

The left fielder of the Fentons had caught the ball.

The Benley's half of the inning was over, and they had not scored.

A large crowd had collected to witness the game, and with breathless interest they waited to see the new pitcher and catcher.

Lou took his place in the box and struck the first man out.

Harry Hitcher caught his delivery so easily that one would have thought they had always played together.

The next Fenton batsman knocked a grounder to shortstop and was neatly thrown out.

The third man was served the same as the first had been, and the first inning was over with the honors even.

In the second Benley scored two runs on a base on balls, a hit, and a three-bagger by Harry Hitcher.

The Fentons succeeded in getting in one run, and the interest in the game increased among the crowd.

The scorers recorded goose eggs for both sides in the third inning, and the wiser ones predicted a very close game.

In the fourth the villagers scored a run and tied the score, and a howl went up from the crowd.

It stood this way until the last half of the seventh, and when Lou started for the pitcher's box he resolved to keep the Fentons from scoring.

As he made a move for his position he was surprised to see Tom Haddock running toward him.

"Say, Ashfield," said the young rascal, putting on as pleasant a look as he could command, "I've got leave to come and see the game, and I want to see our side win. I bear no ill feeling against you, and to prove it here is some of the gum I always chew when I pitch. It will nerve you up to your work. Take it, will you?"

Lou was so much surprised that he took the little packet of gum before he knew what he was doing, and then, not having time to bandy words with Haddock, he simply said: "Thank you!" and hurried to the box.

With a smile of devilish joy Tom Haddock made his way to a cluster of trees beyond third base, where Hamilton was standing, an interested spectator of the game.

The villain nodded as the boy approached.

"You did well," he whispered. "Now, the minute he places a piece of the gum in his mouth, you can bet your money that the Fentons will win the game."

Much to the disappointment of the plotters, Lou did not use the chewing gum that inning.

He was successful in striking out the three batsmen who stood up before him, and the crowd voted him an excellent pitcher.

In the eighth inning the Benleys made two runs, and, by some strange fatality, the Fentons did the same.

The score was still a tie, and there was but one more inning to play.

"Four, four!" sung out the crowd; "now is the time to bet your money on an even thing!"

Hamilton was biting his lips with nervous vexation, and Tom Haddock began to think the scheme was not going to work.

"He won't chew it because I gave it to him," he thought. "It is funny why he took it from me at all."

In the first half of the ninth inning a startling thing took place.

When there were two out, Harry Hitcher went to the bat and made a neat three-bagger, and Lou followed, doing the same thing.

This brought Harry's run in and left Lou on third.

But the score was no longer a tie! It now stood five to four, in favor of the Benley nine!

The next batsman struck out, and the side was retired.

The Fentons now had to either tie the score, or else make two runs to win the game.

When the Benley boys took the field there was a confident smile on the face of their pitcher.

He felt sure that he would retire the side without a run.

Hamilton and Tom Haddock watched him nervously as he stood waiting for the players to get into position.

Had their plot failed?

Just as they came to the conclusion that it had they saw Lou place his hand in his pocket and draw out a packet of chewing gum.

He quickly removed the wrapper and placed a piece in his mouth.

"Now bet your money on the Fenton nine!" hissed Hamilton, with a triumphant glitter in his eyes.

Lou poised the ball to make the delivery.

CHAPTER IX.

BENLEY WINS.

"One strike!"

Lou had delivered the ball, and the batsman struck at it and missed.

The villain, Hamilton, expected to see him stagger and fall to the ground before he could pitch another ball; and Tom Haddock was looking to see something happen, though he knew not what.

And our hero was certainly chewing gum.

Again he pitched, having a ball called on him.

"He is getting wild," thought Hamilton; "the poison is beginning to work."

The next ball the batsman hit and sent it soaring straight upward.

A hush came over the crowd as the pitcher of the Benleys ran lightly to the spot where the ball would be apt to fall.

Not one of his friends doubted but he would catch it.

But Hamilton did; he felt sure that Lou had swallowed enough saliva from the poisoned gum to make him groggy, especially when he strained his neck to look upward.

"Bet that he misses it!" he whispered to Tom Haddock.

The rascally boy caught on immediately.

"Ten dollars it is a muff!" he called out.

"I'll take you!" responded one of the villagers, and then the ball came down—plump into our hero's hands. And he held it.

A wild cry went up from the excited throng, and, with a bow, Lou stepped back to the pitcher's box.

"That's two out!" observed the fellow who had won the ten dollars, as he stepped up to get his money. "Young fellow, I'll bet you another ten that the next man fans out."

"I'll have to go you," said Tom, as he handed over half the money Hamilton had given him to bet with. "You are certainly giving me a good show to come out square."

Hamilton, his face livid with rage and disappointment, stood watching every move Lou Ashfield made.

The boy was just as cool and collected when the third man stepped to the plate as he had been before he put the chewing gum in his mouth.

And he wore such a smile of confidence on his face that the Fenton batsman got "rattled."

"One strike!" called out the umpire, as the first ball was pitched.

The striker had not moved his bat, but as the ball came squarely over the plate he had missed his first opportunity.

But the next ball he meant to hit, for the jeers of the crowd were ringing in his ears.

He gritted hard upon his teeth and swung the bat around with enough force to knock the ball into half a dozen pieces.

But he did not come within two feet of it.

Lou had him at his mercy, and he knew it.

"Give it up!" yelled the Benley rooters.

Whizz! The next ball came over the plate, and the umpire threw off his mask and called out:

"Three strikes and out!"

"Three cheers for old Benley, and Ashfield, the pitcher!" cried the enthusiastic admirers of the academy nine.

The cheers were given heartily.

Meanwhile Lou became the center of an admiring crowd.

Being anxious to see if the poisoned gum was going to get its work in, Hamilton forced his way through the crowd to catch a glimpse of the boy.

Much crestfallen at having lost twenty dollars, and hating Lou worse than ever, Tom Haddock followed him.

"The poison is a humbug, or else the boy never chewed that gum!"

This was the thought of Hamilton when he got close enough to see his condition.

And Tom Haddock muttered to himself:

"Lou Ashfield must have an awful strong constitution to stand the drugged chewing gum. There can be no fake about it, for Myers wouldn't give me twenty dollars to bet on the game if there was. I might better have kept the money and had a good time with it. If I could get the chance I'd cut Ashfield's heart out for winning the game. He is my rival, and we shall be rivals to the death!"

Pretty soon the crowd began to disperse, and Haddock started to follow Hamilton.

But somehow the villain eluded him, and the young rascal was forced to seek the companionship of his brother.

"I wonder if they'll let us ride home in the stage with them?" asked Will Haddock.

"It isn't likely," returned Tom.

Just then the Benley ball team passed them on the way to the building where they were to change their uniforms for their ordinary apparel.

Lou was among them, and as Tom looked at him with darkening brow he saw the young pitcher take a packet of chewing gum from his pocket and toss it to a barefooted urchin.

"Here, Johnny, try your teeth on this!" he said; "I don't use it very often, and I've part of another package left."

As the urchin eagerly tore the wrapper from the little packet the face of Tom Haddock turned as pale as a sheet.

It instantly occurred to him that Lou had not used the packet he had given him and that this was the one.

And if the barefooted little fellow chewed it he was liable to die.

With a single bound the young rascal sprang forward and tore the gum from the urchin's hand.

"That's mine!" he gasped; "here's a nickel for you to buy more."

Scofield, the captain, noticed this action, but he said nothing about it just then.

When the stage was ready to start for home Daggs was approached by the Haddock brothers, who asked him if they could ride with the rest.

As there was just room for them, and they had as much right to ride as any of the scholars, he granted their request.

The majority of the boys in the stage had not noticed the Haddocks on the ball ground, and they were much surprised to see them there.

"Well, Tom, what do you think of our new pitcher?" asked Scofield.

"First-rate," returned the guilty boy, with reddening face.

"Are you satisfied now with the change we made?"

"See here, Scofield!" spoke up Will Haddock, rising and pointing his finger at the baseball captain, "you are only talking like that to make fun of us, because you think you have got Ashfield and Hitcher to back you. You know I whipped you once, and I can do it again!"

"That is what is the matter," chimed in his brother; "we ain't afraid of any one of our size."

The boy scowled at Lou as he spoke.

"Why, how is this?" questioned our hero. "How about the chewing gum, and what you said about being friends with me?"

"Chewing gum!" echoed Scofield. "Why, he thought so much of what you had in your pocket that he grabbed it away from the little fellow you tossed it to, and then gave him a nickel to keep him from crying."

Tom made no reply to this, but the expression on his face showed that he felt anything but comfortable.

A shade of suspicion suddenly flashed across the mind of Lou Ashfield.

Springing to his feet, he faced Tom Haddock and exclaimed:

"I have changed my mind about that packet of gum; hand it over, please."

"Never!" almost screamed the guilty young rascal.

"Tom Haddock, you gave it to me and urged me to use it, but as I had some of my own that had been opened, I did not do it. I believe you put pepper on what you wanted me to chew, or something else that would make me the victim of a dirty trick. Now, then, I want the identical packet of chewing gum that you gave me, and then took from the boy!"

"I haven't got it," returned Haddock; "I threw it away before I got in the stage."

Lou was satisfied that this was a falsehood, for he had noticed Haddock put his hand in his pocket in an uneasy manner.

"If you don't give it to me I'll take it from you!" he cried, and as Tom did not make a move, he seized him by the collar.

CHAPTER X.

HAMILTON'S NEW SCHEME.

Hamilton slunk away from the ball ground in a disgusted frame of mind. Many of the villagers were in a similar state, but they were disgusted because their nine had been beaten by the Benley boys, and not because the pitcher had failed to drop dead in the box.

"Let me see," mused the villain, "I believe those boys said the Benley Academy was about two miles from this place. I think I shall put up at a hotel for a day or two, or until something can be done to put young Ashfield out of the way."

By inquiring he soon found that the Fenton Hotel was the best in the village, and that he could get excellent accommodations there at the rate of two dollars per day.

Putting on the air of a drummer, he entered the barroom, and after purchasing a drink, engaged a room.

As he had no baggage save a small hand satchel, he was requested to pay in advance, which he did—four dollars for two days.

"I'm a circus agent," said Hamilton, in response to the clerk's inquisitive query as to what sort of business he was in.

"You don't mean it!" gasped the man behind the bar. "But I don't think this is much of a town for a circus. One came here about seven years ago, and I guess it was glad to get away. The boys from the Benley Academy 'busted' the show before it was half over. Them boys are a pretty hard set when they get a-going, I can tell you, sir!"

"I guess they are," said Hamilton. "They play a pretty good game of ball, though."

"They played pretty good to-day, but that is because they have a new pitcher and catcher. Our boys in the village are not slow at sports. Fenton is only a little place, but we have a baseball nine, a football eleven, a rowing team, and, in fact, a regular athletic club, which is supported by all our best citizens, who have caught onto the spirit of the thing watching the Benley boys at their various sports."

"A rowing team, you said? Is this the river they practice and race on?" and Hamilton pointed to a winding stream that could be seen from the window.

"Yes; half a mile below here it is pretty wide and straight, and it is that way all the way to Benley, which is a little over three miles, by water, from here."

"I should like to get a rowboat and go down as far as the academy to-morrow afternoon—just to see what it looks like."

"You can hire a boat easily enough for a quarter, or for half a dollar you can get a boy to go along and do the rowing."

"Much obliged for your information," said Hamilton. "How about something to eat—I am rather hungry?"

"Right away, sir."

"I must see that Haddock boy and get him to arrange it so Lou Ashfield will be on the river after dark to-morrow night," mused the villain, as he made his way to the hotel dining-room.

After eating a hearty meal Hamilton lighted a cigar and made his way to the barroom, where the usual crowd of loungers that hang about country hotels had already begun to gather.

Picking up a paper, he carelessly proceeded to look it over.

But a minute later he no longer took any interest in the paper, but was listening to the conversation of the loungers.

"Yes, they do say there is a gang of thieves located somewhere in this county," he heard one of them say. "I see in this week's paper that they robbed the bank at Fernville Thursday night. This makes nineteen robberies in the county in one month."

"I wouldn't be surprised if they were located in the Haunted Woods," said another.

"It would be jist ther place for 'em," observed an old farmer. "That piece o' woodland is jist wild an' lonesome enough ter give a feller ther creeps when he goes through it."

"You're right!" the whole lot chimed in.

"How far is the Haunted Woods from here?" asked Hamilton, after a while.

"It commences 'bout a mile outside ther village an' runs five or six miles to the north," was the reply.

"It is a wonder that the sheriff don't hunt the robbers out."

"I hear they are a-goin' ter try it; but I reckon they'll have a time of it. Ther Haunted Woods are one of ther wildest pieces of country in this State. It are full of swamps an' quagmires, an' there is only one road that goes through it. Why, if a stranger was ter git a few rods off ther road he'd like as not walk inter a swamp an' stick there till doomsday!"

Hamilton said no more. But it occurred to him that in case all other ways failed, it would be a good thing to get Lou Ashfield in the Haunted Woods and do away with him there.

That the man was a heartless scoundrel the reader can easily judge.

Hamilton remained up late that night, and being fond of a spree occasionally, he spent several dollars at the bar.

The hotel loungers voted him a "bully" fellow, and advised him not to bring a circus to Fenton, on account of the schoolboys at Benley.

Before retiring he made arrangements for one of them to row him down the river as far as the academy the next day, which was Sunday, so the first part of his second scheme was laid.

It was late when the villain arose the next morning, and after eating a rather light breakfast he sought out the villager who had promised to take him out in a boat.

He was not long in finding him, and half an hour later the two were seated in a light rowboat, while the villager pulled with lusty stroke down the river.

When about a mile had been covered Hamilton's companion pointed out a road that ran oblique with the stream, and said:

"There is ther road that leads through ther Haunted Woods."

"Is that so?" asked the villain.

"Yes; it switches off jist this side of ther Benley school, and follers ther river till right here it runs off in another direction. It's a lonely road, an' ain't used much nowadays."

The scheming scoundrel, who meant to take the life of an in-

nocent boy, was learning something of interest to him all the time, and he was careful to learn just where the lonely highway started, and how far it was to the quagmires in the woods.

As the boat had the current with it they were not long in coming in sight of Prof. Haggard's great academy for boys, and Hamilton ordered the villager to cease rowing and allow the boat to drift past.

Presently Hamilton observed one of the scholars coming down the hill toward the bank of the river.

He gave a start of surprise, and then a muttered exclamation of satisfaction came from his lips.

The approaching boy was no other than Tom Haddock.

"Set me ashore here for a few minutes," said the villain. "I want to take a look about the place. You can go on down the river for a little distance, and then come back after me."

"All right," returned his companion, not the least bit surprised at this remark; and a minute later he caused the prow of the boat to grate upon the pebbly beach.

Hamilton sprang out, and pushing his way through a cluster of bushes, came face to face with the boy who hated Lou Ashfield.

CHAPTER XI.

A DARING RESCUE.

With a mighty effort Tom Haddock tore himself loose from our hero's grasp, and with a headlong rush made his escape from the stage.

Lou darted after him, but too late. Haddock hurled the packet of poisoned chewing gum far into the environs of a neighboring swamp.

"Now I defy you to get it!" he almost screamed, in a sort of fiendish joy.

"Tom Haddock, I've a notion to——"

Lou checked himself, and then hastily added:

"You are a cowardly sneak, and not worth bothering with!"

As our hero turned to enter the stage a demoniacal gleam shot from Haddock's eyes, and picking up a stone, he hurled it with all his might at Lou's head.

"Look out, Lou—drop!" shouted those in the waiting vehicle.

With great presence of mind he obeyed, and the stone, which was as large as a baseball, went shooting over him, striking a tree on the side of the road with such force as to split the bark from it.

As Lou sprang to his feet and realized what would have been the consequence if he had not dropped, his temper got the better of him.

He resolved to punish Haddock for his dastardly action.

Springing forward with a bound, he started after the vengeful boy, who was now running down the road.

Lou was the better runner by far, and in less than five minutes he overtook him.

Tom turned before he got near enough to lay hands on him and, with a muttered oath, he drew his knife.

"Let me alone, Lou Ashfield!" he cried; "if you don't I'll kill you!"

But our hero did not allow himself to be checked by any such threat as that.

With a quick movement he darted forward and seized the young villain by the wrist, striking him a blow on the forehead at the same time.

Tom had expected to see his pursuer halt at the sight of his knife, and Lou's action was entirely unexpected.

Dazed and confused from the blow he received, he easily allowed the knife to be wrenched from his hand.

Lou coolly pocketed it, and then exclaimed:

"Now, Tom Haddock, I am going to punish you for trying to kill me! Stand up like a man!"

Haddock did so, preparing to make a fight for it.

There were but a few passes, and then the revengeful boy was knocked down.

Lou waited for him to get up and renew the fight, but Haddock had enough of it, and started to crawl away on his hands and knees.

With a cry of disgust Lou administered a couple of kicks to him, causing him to rise to his feet and run like the unprincipled sneak he was.

By this time the stage had reached the spot, and our hero was cheered for his action.

Will Haddock, who had been forced to remain in the stage by Harry Hitcher, was now allowed to get out and follow his brother to the academy on foot.

On the way back the boys promised Lou to say nothing to the professor about what had taken place.

Like our hero, they believed it would only make Tom Haddock worse to have him punished.

Daggs also agreed not to mention it, and so the professor did not hear of it when they returned.

The next day being Sunday, the boys had little to do but to attend the services in the chapel.

They of course were not allowed to indulge in their sports on this day, but the rules did not prohibit them from taking a stroll, if they felt so disposed.

About ten o'clock Lou, Harry and Scofield set out for a walk to the village.

Benley was a much smaller place than Fenton; still it was a very pretty little village.

It was a pleasant morning in September, and as the highway was shaded by trees the most of the way, the walk was a treat to the boys.

They chatted gayly over the past, present and future, and were enjoying themselves as only boys can.

Presently a pleasing sight caught their eyes, and they halted for a moment.

Coming down a crossroad were two young people on bicycles.

While our three young friends were watching them turn the corner into the road—very nearly where they were standing—they heard the thud of horses' hoofs.

A single glance showed them a runaway team coming directly for them, not over fifty yards from the cyclists.

The boys saw the team first, and Lou quickly shouted to the young couple and told them to look out.

To attempt to pass a runaway team with a bicycle is a dangerous thing to do, and the boy on the wheel evidently knew this, for he quickly dismounted and called to his fair companion to do the same.

Just then her wheel ran into a bed of sand, and the next instant she was thrown heavily into the middle of the road.

And the maddened horses were not over forty feet distant.

Lou and his companions expected to see the boy rush to the rescue, but instead he stood as though petrified, his face as white as marble.

"The girl will be killed!" cried Harry Hitcher.

"No, she won't," replied Lou; and like an antelope he bounded to the spot.

The girl's dress had become entangled in her bicycle, and, half dazed from her fall, she was vainly endeavoring to rise to her feet.

Our hero reached her at about the same time the horses did,

and, thinking he was too late, Harry and Scofield turned their heads to shut out the sickening sight.

They expected the fair cyclist would be mangled by the cruel iron hoofs of the maddened team.

But no such thing occurred.

Lou seized the girl's arm and pulled her aside just in the nick of time.

The bicycle was smashed into pieces, but the life of its fair rider was saved.

In a fainting condition our hero carried her to a mossy bank.

Without paying any attention to the runaway team, which continued on its way down the road, Harry and Scofield hurried to the spot.

As if he had just awakened, the boy with the bicycle also approached.

"Are you—aw—hurt, Hazel?" he asked, in a dudish tone of voice.

His question seemed to arouse her and, arising to her feet, she returned:

"No, Reginald, I am not hurt; but I cannot thank you for being alive. You had plenty of time to drag both me and my bicycle from the road, but you stood there and waited for this brave young gentleman to come to my rescue. I was not so badly scared but that I know pretty well what took place. Thank you ever so much!"

The last sentence was spoken to Lou, who responded by tipping his hat.

"We were on our way to church," went on the girl, whose fright had almost subsided, "and I did not see my danger until he—Reginald Munsey, and a brave young man he is!—called out to me to dismount. I tried to, but you saw what happened."

"It was my duty to save you if I could," responded our hero. "I am sorry I was not in time to keep your bicycle from being run over, too."

Meanwhile the face of the boy called Reginald Munsey was covered by an angry flush. Evidently he was not pleased with the way the girl spoke of him.

CHAPTER XII.

AN EVENTFUL MORNING.

Reginald Munsey felt like kicking himself because he did not spring forward and save Hazel Cleverton from the horses' hoofs instead of allowing our hero to do it.

He was mad at himself and mad at everybody and everything; and when his fair companion spoke in such a sarcastic tone he lost his temper entirely.

"Baw Jove!" he exclaimed; "Hazel, what do you want to stand and talk to these—aw—schoolboys for? The fellow saved you—aw—from being hurt, which I could have done if——"

"If you had thought of it, Reginald," interrupted the girl. "You should be very thankful that things turned out as they have. Be good enough to pick my poor bicycle up and carry it home for me; perhaps it is not beyond repair."

"I suppose your father will send the fellow a check," said the angry young dude, without noticing her remark. "He is but waiting for you to say as much."

Lou's face reddened at this insult, but in as cool a tone as he could command he exclaimed:

"I want you to understand, sir, that in all probability you need a check fully as much as I do. I ran to the young lady's assistance because I saw she was in danger; you showed yourself a coward by staying away!"

"What!" almost screamed Munsey; "you call me a coward? Take that!"

He made a slap at Lou's face, but it did not reach, for the boy was altogether too quick for one of the dude's sort.

"I will chastise you now, anyhow!" the enraged dude shrieked, and he followed our hero up and endeavored to slap him again.

Lou thought it about time to do something now, so with a quick movement, he seized his aggressor by the nose and gave it a sharp twist, which brought him to his knees.

Hazel Cleverton laughed heartily at this performance, and Harry and Scofield also joined in.

When Munsey scrambled to his feet he did not make another rush at Lou, but shaking his fist, he cried:

"I will have satisfaction for this! We will see who is the coward—you or I!"

Then he turned on his heel, and picking up the wreck of the young lady's bicycle, swung it over his shoulder and started down the road.

"I thank you again for your brave action," said Hazel Cleverton, "and now wish you good-morning."

Lou and his two companions tipped their hats and responded, and then the fair young girl, who had come within an ace of losing her life a few minutes before, took charge of the dude's wheel and pushed it along while she walked in his wake.

"I am always meeting with some sort of an adventure, it seems," observed our hero, as he brushed and straightened out his clothes. "Now I have made another enemy."

"Not a very dangerous one, I guess," laughed Harry Hitcher.

"I should say not," spoke up Scofield.

"Well, shall we go on down to the village?"

"Yes, we might strike a little more excitement."

"Ah!" exclaimed Lou suddenly, as he looked up the road and saw two men approaching; "here are the victims of the runaway, no doubt."

The boy was right; the appearance of the men was enough to show that.

Hatless, and with their clothing torn, they were hurrying in pursuit of the team.

Our three friends gave them all the information they could, which was simply that the runaway had continued on the straight road and not turned the corner, and the two luckless individuals hurried on.

The boys then walked on to the village, and shortly after they got there they beheld the runaway team, hitched to a badly battered wagon, drive up to the livery stable.

"They will have a nice little bill to settle, I guess," remarked Scofield.

"You bet!" replied Harry.

At that moment the attention of the three was attracted by a couple of elderly men, who, in spite of the fact that it was Sunday, had been imbibing altogether too freely.

"Here is a chance for some fun," said Lou, with a merry twinkle in his eyes. "Let's brace them on the subject of intemperance."

His companions nodded, and with broad grins on their faces followed our hero.

The two men saw the boys before they got to them, and before Lou could get a chance to speak a word one of them bawled out:

"Where you goin', boys—church?"

"You have hit it exactly, sir," returned the young pitcher of the Benley nine. "Will you kindly inform us where you got your load?"

"Wha-a-t!" gasped the other fellow. "Boy, you are—hic—"

insultin'. Load! Why, we ain't—hic—half loaded yet, are we, pard?"

"Guess not," was the emphatic rejoinder. "Here, boys, have a drink!"

He pulled a flask from his pocket, and in a friendly manner tendered it to the boys.

The next instant something happened that broke up all the fun our friends contemplated having.

The village constable arrived upon the scene and took charge of the intoxicated pair.

And that was not all, either. The instant he recognized the boys as belonging to the Benley Academy he arrested them also.

The village authorities were strongly prejudiced against Prof. Haggard's scholars, and the constable took it for granted that the three boys had been the means of getting the men drunk, and were having a lark with them.

Consequently he considered it his duty to arrest them.

And he did, but he did not succeed in taking them to the lockup.

Lou made a dive between the constable's legs and upset him; and, wishing to imitate their leader's example as nearly as they could, Harry and Scofield acted upon the intoxicated men in a similar manner.

The result was that there was a tangled mass of humanity on the ground, and the three Benley boys were scudding across lots in the direction of the academy.

"I shouldn't allow a village constable to take me—no matter what I had done!" panted Scofield, as they came down to a walk at the outskirts of the place. "They are altogether too officious, and the majority of them know no more about the law than a child five years of age. A village constable is the most important personage—in his own mind—that resides in a township."

"I guess the fellow I sent to grass don't feel quite as important as he did when he arrested us," said Lou.

"What time is it?" asked Scofield.

"Eleven o'clock," returned Hitcher.

"Let's go in the woods here and see if the chestnuts aren't pretty nearly ripe; we've lots of time yet."

This suggestion suited Lou and Harry to a T, and the next moment all three vaulted over the old-fashioned rail fence at the side of the road and entered the woods.

The undergrowth was pretty thick, and it took them some time to reach the group of chestnut trees.

"They ain't ready to drop yet," observed Scofield, as he peered above him. "There hasn't been a good frost yet. When it does come, then look out! You can pick up chestnuts by the bushel in these woods."

As he finished speaking he stepped back without looking and came in contact with a cluster of briars.

Somehow he lost his balance and sat down right into the prickly bushes.

The boy's companions laughed, and then assisted him from his uncomfortable seat.

As they did so Lou's foot struck something that gave forth a metallic ring.

Curious to see what it was, he knelt and pulled the bushes aside, and a canvas sack was disclosed.

"What's this?" our hero exclaimed, as he dragged it out of the bushes.

"Open it and see," suggested Harry.

"That's it," nodded Scofield; and in the twinkling of an eye he untied the knot that held the mouth of the sack together.

A curious assortment of tools came to their view as they peered inside.

There were hammers and saws of all sizes, a huge bunch of keys and a host of other things.

"Do you know what we have found?" asked Lou, excitedly.

"What?" gasped his companions.

"A kit of burglars' tools!"

Before the astonished boys could make a reply they heard the sounds of approaching footsteps.

"S-h-h-h!" whispered Lou; "let us hide!"

Placing the sack where they had found it, they crept noiselessly into the bushes.

CHAPTER XIII.

HADDOCK IMPROVES IN VILLAINY.

Tom Haddock gave a violent start when he beheld Hamilton on the river bank.

"You here?" he gasped.

"Yes; I came down the river purposely to see you. Are we alone here?"

"Yes," answered the boy. "You are not mad with me because the chewing gum did not work, are you? I will tell you all about it, and then you will know that I did the best I could."

"I have no doubt you did the best you could," said Hamilton, patronizingly, as he led the way close to the edge of the water.

The scheming scoundrel and his willing tool sat down on a rock that overhung the placid surface of the river, and in a low voice Hamilton told what he wanted.

"I cannot induce Ashfield to come out on the river," said Haddock, shaking his head decisively. "He would not listen to anything I said. He thinks less than ever of me since the ball game, and I hate him worse than I did before."

The last was spoken with a sort of hiss, and the eyes of Hamilton sparkled.

He now believed that he could fully trust the boy.

"See here!" he exclaimed, placing his hand on Tom's shoulder, "have you told any one about what I said or gave to you?"

"No," was the truthful reply; "not even my brother."

"Do you intend to mention it?"

"Never! It would do me an injury to do it."

"Suppose I should go to the professor and tell him I heard you talking of getting square with Lou Ashfield, even if you had to kill him? Suppose I should add that I gave you a piece of chewing gum, stating that it contained poison, and that you made it your business to give it to Ashfield, just to revenge yourself upon him? What then?"

The face of the boy turned pale, and he shifted his feet uneasily.

"I should be expelled from the academy," he answered slowly, "and—well, what would happen to you in such a case?"

"Nothing."

"Why not?"

"You say you threw the chewing gum into a swamp when Ashfield started to chase you. Suppose I should say the gum was just the same as any other kind, and that I did it just to see how bad you were?"

"But I am sure it was poisoned all right."

"So am I, but suppose I should say it wasn't? Where is the proof?"

"I see," said Tom, "you are putting these 'ifs' and 'ands' in to try me. Don't worry, Mr. Myers; I should never tell if I saw you stab Lou Ashfield through the heart! I know you want to get him out of the way, and I want to help you, because I hate him!"

Hamilton winced at these words, but a feeling of satisfaction came over him at the same time.

He was now well satisfied that he could trust the boy to do anything, and in a very few words he told him of his idea of getting Lou into the quicksands of the Haunted Woods.

Haddock remained silent for a moment, and then, with the air of a person who carefully weighs what he is going to say, took Hamilton by the arm.

"You have good ideas, Mr. Myers. Either the river or the quicksands will do. But look here!" and he lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper; "what do I get when the thing is accomplished?"

Hamilton shrugged his shoulders.

"You are beginning to take a business view of it," observed he. "I thought your hatred was enough to spur you on. I haven't a great deal of money, as you may understand."

"Perhaps you haven't, but somebody else has. I am not as green as I look, and I consider I ought to have a fair share of what you are going to receive, if I do my part of the business."

The boy was now talking with the air of a hardened criminal, and his coolness even astonished the villain before him.

Hamilton thought a moment, and then replied:

"I'll give you two hundred dollars if the business is settled in one week from to-day. Is that satisfactory?"

"It is," exclaimed Haddock, with a greedy look in his dull, gray eyes.

Two hundred dollars! That was a large sum to him, for though his parents were wealthy, they allowed him very little spending money.

Two hundred dollars to commit a murder.

A moment later Hamilton saw his boat coming toward the shore.

"The minute you get things right come to Fenton and let me know. I shall be at the Fenton Hotel until the thing is over."

"Very well," replied Tom Haddock. "Good-day."

"Good-day!"

And the two villainous plotters parted, Hamilton going up the river in the boat, and Haddock walking along the river bank until he came to the boathouse belonging to the academy.

"I think I'll take a little row myself," he muttered. "I don't feel like eating anything just yet, and if I miss a meal it will suit old Hag."

He soon had a little bateau afloat, and getting in, he rowed with an easy, swinging stroke down the river.

Haddock was certainly a fine oarsman. He was a member of the academy crew, and he had always acquitted himself finely when they rowed a race.

On he kept for over a mile, and then, observing a monster wild grape vine on the right bank of the river, he sent the boat ashore and sprang out to gather some of the fruit.

They were so plentiful that Tom soon had the stern-sheets of the boat pretty well covered with them.

"I'll take some to Will and the other fellows," he thought.

Just as he was about to step back into the boat two men suddenly burst through the bushes a few feet from him.

They were coarse-looking and very roughly dressed, and one of them carried a canvas sack.

"Say, boy, set us across the river, will you?" exclaimed one of them.

"Certainly," replied Haddock; "but as my boat is pretty small I'll have to take one of you at a time."

"All right," and the fellow with the sack got in.

If Haddock had not felt inclined to accommodate them he would have hardly dared refuse on account of their "tough" appearance.

As the distance across the river was not great, he soon had the first one across, and then came back after the other.

When he was landed on the other side the man tossed Tom a quarter, and without a word followed his companion into the bushes.

"I wonder what those fellows are up to?" mused the boy. "They look like a pair of thieves."

He pushed the boat off and slowly made for the center of the river.

Just as he had pointed the prow in the direction of the academy he heard some one calling to him.

He turned and beheld three boys standing on the bank, in the same spot he had taken the two men from.

He gave a start when he beheld them, for one of them was his hated rival, Lou Ashfield, and the others were Hitcher and Scofield.

"Say, Haddock!" called out Lou, "have you seen two strange men around here?"

"No!" retorted the young rascal, telling a lie for no cause whatever.

"That is funny," spoke up Scofield; "we've been following them for the past few minutes, and they came direct for the river bank. They are thieves, and have robbed the house of Mr. Cleverton this morning!"

"Haven't seen a sign of a human being," said Haddock, shaking his head and starting to row up the river.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ROBBERS.

Our three young friends had scarcely concealed themselves in the clump of bushes when two men came in sight beneath the chestnut trees.

Lou and his companions were where they could see without being seen, and so long as they remained perfectly quiet there was little danger of their being discovered.

The two men were tough-looking customers, and to judge from their exultant talk they had just returned from a successful enterprise.

"Well, Hank, we were in luck ter git hold of ther stuff afore ther gal an' that fool of a feller got back with the broken bicycle," one of them observed, as he patted a bulky portion of his coat in an affectionate manner.

"Yes, Mike," was the rejoinder, "we are what I calls lucky dogs. So much for me havin' a sweetheart that works in old Cleverton's house. Now we want ter git across ther river an' git to our hangout in ther swamps as soon as possible."

"I'm goin' ter have a swig of this wine afore I go. It ought ter be somethin' fine."

The rascal produced a bottle from his pocket and proceeded to draw the cork.

"My! but that is fine!" he exclaimed, smacking his lips. "Try it, Mike."

Mike did so, and promptly agreed with his companion's opinion.

A couple of "swigs" of the liquor made them careless about leaving very soon, and they sat down on the ground and prepared to drain the bottle.

With bated breath the three boys waited for them to depart.

"If we only had a revolver apiece we could capture those fellows," said Lou in a low whisper.

"That is so; but as we haven't we have got to keep still as mice," returned Harry in the same tone.

"Anyhow, when they go we will follow them and endeavor to

locate their headquarters," observed Scofield. "Then we can report to the officers of the law and have them arrested."

It was over half an hour before the men arose to their feet and threw the empty bottle aside.

One of them seized the sack, which was dangerously near the concealed boys, and, without noticing that it had been opened, deposited two or three queer-looking instruments into it, and then swung it over his shoulder.

"Now we will be off!" he exclaimed. "The girl said it was not likely they would discover the house had been robbed till to-morrow morning. Smart girl that!"

The next minute the thieves, who were now about half intoxicated, started through the woods.

As soon as they were a hundred yards away Lou and his two friends emerged from the bushes and followed them.

The occasional cracking of a twig told them the direction in which the men were going, and in a manner that would have done credit to a trio of Indian scouts they followed.

At the expiration of fifteen minutes they lost track of the robbers, and not knowing what else to do, they cautiously proceeded on straight ahead.

Two minutes later they came upon the bank of the river, and saw Tom Haddock in the boat, as has already been described.

"It is strange where they could have gone," observed Lou, as they gazed at the rapidly receding boat. "I wonder— Ah! here are some tracks. They have certainly been here, and—"

"Tom Haddock has set them across the river," interrupted Harry.

"But if he did why did he want to tell a lie about it?" spoke up Scofield, scratching his head in a puzzled manner.

"He hates me so that in all probability he would not give us the satisfaction of knowing what he saw or did," returned Lou, striking the nail exactly on the head.

"Well, he certainly did take them across, for here are the prints of rubber-soled shoes; and also those of large, heavy boots. Haddock wears rubber-soled shoes the biggest part of the time. I think there is no doubt that he not only saw them, but set them across."

His companions were compelled to believe this to be the correct solution of the matter, but as they had no way of getting across the stream, they were compelled to turn their steps in the direction of the academy.

It was past the dinner hour when they arrived, but they made their way direct to the professor's office and reported what they had learned.

The old gentleman sent them to the dining-room, and then ordered Daggs to find Tom Haddock and bring him to him.

Haddock appeared in a sheepish manner, hat in hand.

"Thomas," said the professor, in a stern voice, "did you set two men across the river?"

"Yes, sir," replied the boy, thinking it best to tell the truth.

"When you were questioned about having seen two strange men why did you say you had not, then?"

"It was Ashfield who asked me, and I thought it was none of his business—that is why I said I had not seen the men."

"Instead of acting the way you did you should have conveyed Ashfield and his companions across the river. They were following the two men, who have robbed the house of Col. Cleverton, who resides, as you know, about a mile from here. You made a mistake, Haddock, but as there was nothing in your actions to warrant me in punishing you I will let you go."

The rascally boy breathed a sigh of relief and went out.

The professor then sent for Daggs, and after writing a note to the colonel, dispatched him with it.

Daggs came back an hour later and reported that the village authorities had been aroused, and that officers had been sent out in search of the robbers.

When Lou heard this he laughed at his companions.

"If the officers are all like the constable we came in contact with this morning, I am afraid it will be a long while before the robbers are caught," said he.

The next morning the professor astonished his scholars by remarking as he came to the desk:

"Boys, I am of English extraction, and I believe in English sports to a great extent. I have decided to give you a half holiday this afternoon for the purpose of indulging in a paper chase. As Thomas and William Haddock were so unfortunate as to be dropped from your ball nine, I shall do them the honor of appointing them to make the trail, which the rest of the scholars can follow. You can go as far from the academy as you like, so long as you are all in by the time the bell rings for supper. Those who are to make the trail can leave the schoolroom an hour before noon, and get the paper torn into bits and put in the bags ready for use. This is a healthful and invigorating sport, and I trust you will enjoy yourselves."

"Whew!" gasped Lou and Harry Hitcher; "what has got over the old man?"

"I know what is the matter," spoke up Scofield. "Daggs told me that Col. Cleverton sent a note praising the three boys who discovered the thieves, and praising the manner in which the academy was run. Daggs says he read the note, as it was not sealed. He also told me that Hag felt so good over it that he drank two extra glasses of sherry this morning."

"That accounts for the half holiday, then," said Lou. "Well, the paper chase is all right, but I should have liked it better if some one else than the Haddocks had been chosen to make the trail."

At that very moment the thoughts that were running through the mind of Tom Haddock were something like this:

"This is a lucky stroke for me! If I don't land Lou Ashfield into one of the swamps of the Haunted Woods, so he will get fast into the quagmire, I'll give it up as a bad job!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE PAPER CHASE STARTS.

The lessons were not studied very well that morning. The boys were too much excited over the prospects of the half holiday and the paper chase.

Those who did not feel very friendly toward the professor began to think that he was not so bad, after all.

The Haddocks supplied themselves with canvas sacks, which they swung over their shoulders. Each of these was stuffed with torn bits of paper, which they were to strew upon the ground sufficiently close together to make a trail.

It was decided that the trail-makers should leave the academy at one o'clock, and the rest of the boys make the start an hour later.

The first two boys to overtake those carrying the sacks were to be the ones to make the trail at the next chase; but when the time came for the start to be made, Prof. Haggard still further astonished his school by announcing that the first boy to overtake the Haddocks would be presented with a gold medal, and the second with a silver one.

The boys sent up a hearty cheer at this, and then the old man gave the word for Tom and Will Haddock to start.

At a brisk trot the two set out, dropping the bits of paper as they went.

When they reached the road, Tom said:

"We will cut across lots here and go up through the woods near Fenton. I want to stop there to get some cigarettes and a plug of tobacco, and you can wait for me in the edge of the woods."

"All right," returned his brother. "While you are in Fenton you might as well get a quarter's worth of whiskey; it will do us good, I think, and help us to make the chase a long one."

Tom agreed. Young as they were, both were addicted to the rum and tobacco habit, though they dared not let the professor or any of the teachers know it.

On they hurried, leaving a winding trail over hills, down gullies and through intricate mazes of undergrowth.

Both boys possessed good wind, and in a remarkably short time they came in sight of the village of Fenton.

"You stay right here until I come back," said Tom. "We have plenty of time, and we will be off again before they start from the academy."

"Don't forget the whiskey!" exclaimed Will, as he fished a quarter from his pocket and handed it over.

"You bet I won't!" and his brother hastened in the direction of the village, leaving his sack of paper bits behind.

Tom Haddock had a double purpose in going to Fenton. He wanted the cigarettes and tobacco, but he desired to see Hamilton, or Myers, as he knew him, more than anything else.

He had made up his mind that the paper chase would terminate Lou Ashfield's earthly career, and he wanted to let the man most interested know what he proposed to do.

In ten minutes' time the young villain reached the Fenton Hotel.

He observed Hamilton seated on the stoop, his legs cocked up at an angle of forty-five degrees, and a cigar in his mouth.

"How are you, Mr. Myers?" said Tom, in a mild tone of voice, as he leaned with his foot on the step.

"Hello!" exclaimed Hamilton, with a start; "how are you? What's up—anything?"

"It won't do to talk here," and Haddock nodded apprehensively.

"Well, I'll take a walk with you in the direction of the fields."

"All right. I've got to buy something in the barroom; by that time you will be ready."

The country hotel kept the things he wanted, and five minutes later Tom Haddock had purchased them.

Then he started slowly back to the spot where he had left his brother, Hamilton following a few yards behind.

Halfway to the edge of the woods Tom halted and leaned against a rail fence.

"Well," said Hamilton, pausing before him, "have you got things right?"

"Yes," was the reply; "we've got him dead to rights now!"

"Tell me about it, but don't talk too loud."

In a low tone the boy told him of the paper chase, and how he expected to lead our hero into one of the swamps.

"Do you know where these dangerous quagmires are?" asked Hamilton.

"Yes, I've been in the Haunted Woods more than once, and I've had them pointed out to me."

"I'll take a walk that way myself just to see how things go. Remember, the thing must be done right, and when it is you get the money."

There was a glitter of triumph in Tom's eyes as he assured the villain that he would not fail.

Then they parted, the boy hurrying to the place where he had left his brother, and the man making his way leisurely in the direction of the Haunted Woods.

"You've been gone long enough, Tom!" exclaimed Will Had-

dock as Tom arrived. "If we don't hurry they'll catch us before we get very far."

"Couldn't help it," panted the boy. "Here is your whiskey; drink it!"

Will took a good pull at the flask and smacked his lips after the fashion of an old sailor. Then his brother took barely a taste of it and lighted a cigarette.

"I guess we'll go now," he observed as he swung the sack over his shoulder. "Will, don't drink too much of that stuff, or you'll give out before we get through."

"Never mind me," was the reply; "you like cigarettes better than rum, but I don't. I could drink all there is in this flask and it wouldn't hurt me a bit!"

"I'll bet you half a dollar you can't!" said Tom, as a thought struck him that it would be a good plan to let his brother get drunk so he would know nothing of the murderous scheme he had in view.

"I'll take you—that is, if you don't want any of the whiskey."

"I shan't touch any of it. I think I can run faster without it."

"And I can run faster with it," chuckled Will, as he took another drink. "In less than an hour from now you can hand me over the half dollar."

On the two boys hurried, scattering the bits of paper behind them as they went.

Tom managed to induce Will to take a chew from the plug of tobacco between drinks, and this helped matters along considerably.

At length the brothers reached the confines of the Haunted Woods.

Will was now in a hilarious state. He kept singing snatches of songs and throwing handfuls of paper in every direction.

At length he had imbibed the entire contents of the bottle, and then he concluded to go no farther for a while.

Tom succeeded in getting him into some bushes, and a few moments later he was lying in a drunken slumber.

"There! now I can do the business that will put an end to Lou Ashfield's career," muttered the young scoundrel. "There is a dangerous quagmire a few hundred feet from here, I guess I——"

He was cut short in his meditations, for at that moment two men suddenly appeared before him.

"Hello!" exclaimed Tom; and then he gave a gasp of astonishment.

The men were those he had conveyed across the river the day before.

"Hello, yourself," answered one of the robbers. "Why, Mike, if it ain't ther boy that did us a mighty good turn yesterday, I'm ther son of a millionaire! What are you doin', boy, a-throwin' all this paper around here?"

"I'm leading a paper chase from the academy," returned Haddock, with just a tinge of fear in his voice.

"Oh! you're makin' a trail for ther rest of ther boys to follow, are you? Well, you take my advice an' git out of this place. If you don't some of you will get fast in the quagmire; won't they, Mike?"

"That's just what they will, Hank!" was the reply.

"Say!" said Tom, lowering his voice to a whisper, "you had better look out! the whole town is looking for you fellows. Three of the boys at our school saw you in the woods and heard you talking about having robbed Col. Cleverton's house. They followed you to the river, and got there just after I had set you across. They asked me if I had seen two strange men, and I told them no, just because one of the boys is my sworn enemy."

"Whew!" exclaimed the robbers, in a breath. "Boy, are you tellin' the truth?"

"I am. Why should I lie to you without any cause?"

"That's so. Well, much obliged to you. We might be able to do you a good turn some day, if you don't let on that you met us to-day. Look out for the quagmires, boy. So long!"

The next minute the two men took a hasty departure, and ran almost into the arms of Hamilton, who had a cocked revolver in his hand.

"Hands up, gentlemen!" said the villain, calmly. "If you want to save yourselves from being arrested you will do exactly as I say!"

CHAPTER XVI.

MURDER!

A devilish smile of satisfaction lit up the countenance of Hamilton as he realized that he held the two robbers in his power.

He had been hidden not ten feet away, and had heard every word of the conversation between them and Tom Haddock.

The robbers, Hank and Mike, were taken completely by surprise, and the revolver made them feel anything but comfortable.

"Wha-a-at do you want us to do?" one of the villains finally gasped.

"Lead me to your headquarters and let me become a member of the gang you belong to," said Hamilton, coolly.

"Who are you, anyway?"

"It matters not who I am. You can call me Myers," was the reply. "Now, then, this boy has got a little job on hand pretty soon, and if he fails I want to take another boy to your headquarters and fix him so he will never see the outside of these woods again. Do you understand what sort of a man I am now?"

"The boy he refers to is one of those who heard and saw you in the woods after you committed the robbery," spoke up Tom Haddock, who had remained standing in his track ever since the appearance of Hamilton.

"This are mighty curious business," observed the villain called Hank. "Take your pistol out of range of my head, mister; we'll do as you say."

"Say, you ain't a detective, are you?" asked Mike, as Hamilton lowered his weapon.

"Hardly," was the retort. "Aren't you satisfied with what I have told you?"

"He is all right," again spoke up Tom Haddock. "I know Mr. Myers pretty well."

"I wouldn't be surprised if all four of us are genuine rogues," said Hank, with a grin.

"If you think you can teach me anything in the line of villainy you are welcome to try," and as Hamilton spoke he drew himself up proudly.

"And I guess I'm not slow, either," put in Haddock; "even if I am rather young."

"Oh, you'll do," returned Hamilton. "Any one who hates a person enough to kill him, and is perfectly willing to try it, is all right."

The boy's eyes flashed.

"Lou Ashfield will die to-day!" he exclaimed. "I know enough of him to feel satisfied that he will be ahead of the rest in the chase. He must pitch headforemost into the quagmire somewhere around here. Show me where there is a good place, will you?"

The question was addressed to the two robbers, who stood in their tracks, almost speechless at the boy's cool way of speaking of committing a murder.

Before they could reply the shouting of boys could be heard in the distance.

"Here they come!" exclaimed Haddock; "they are hot upon the paper trail. Show me the quagmire."

"Come on," said one of the men; "I'll show you."

Hamilton and Tom followed the two men through the bushes—the latter dropping the paper bits as he went.

In less than two minutes they came to the edge of the marsh, which was screened from view by a thick belt of undergrowth.

"There," observed Hank, pointing to the treacherous place, "if a fellow once falls in there it is all up with him, unless he has somebody handy by to git him out."

"Well, Lou Ashfield must go in there head first, then I'll be sure that he won't get out!"

As Haddock uttered the words he gritted hard upon his teeth.

"They are getting nearer all the time," observed Hamilton. "You want to make sure that Ashfield is ahead."

"He is ahead in everything he undertakes, so it is not likely this will prove an exception," said the young villain, as he bent a twig low to the ground and fastened it so it would trip a person.

"You three hide right here," he went on. "I am going to see if Ashfield is really ahead of the rest. If he is, which will surely be the case, scrape some leaves over these papers here after he tumbles in, and I will go on with the trail back to the road again."

"But how will we know whether he is ahead or not?" asked Hamilton.

"I won't allow any one else to come this way, for I will show myself so they will chase me, instead of following the trail here. In that case you must cover up the bits of paper, anyhow, so some other person will not fall into the trap."

The nerve the boy possessed fairly took Hamilton's breath away.

"If that fellow lives long enough he will make a king among scoundrels," he thought.

"Do you understand?" asked Haddock impatiently, as the cries of the Benley boys came nearer.

"Yes!" responded the three.

Away darted the boy to the road.

He happened to strike a portion of it that ran nearly straight for about three hundred yards, and he cautiously peered in the direction the boys would come from.

Almost instantly his heart gave a jump. There was only one boy in sight, and that, sure enough, was Lou Ashfield.

Like a rabbit Tom Haddock bounded back into the bushes and hurried to the edge of the marsh.

"Ashfield is ahead!" he cried, hoarsely, though he could not see his hiding accomplices.

"All right," replied the voice of Hamilton.

Then the boy who had murder in his heart began to tremble for the first time.

A strange fear came over him, and he, too, crawled into the bushes out of sight.

A minute passed.

It seemed that Lou Ashfield should have reached the spot by this time.

But suddenly the hiding four heard footsteps.

Not one of them raised their head to peer through the foliage. Half a minute later there was a crash in the bushes, followed by a dull splash.

It was all over.

Not a sound came from the victim, which showed that he had fallen in head first.

Pale and trembling, Tom Haddock arose with the word murderer stamped on his brow.

"Cover the trail!" he whispered, hoarsely; "I will make a new one!"

Hamilton and the two robbers quickly obeyed as the boy's form shot in the direction of the road.

Handful after handful. The boy scattered the bits of paper so there could be no mistaking the trail now.

And he kept on running like a frightened hare.

Meanwhile Hamilton and his new friends were making their way slowly through the mazes of the woods.

Hank and Mike had agreed to take him to the headquarters of the gang they belonged to and make him one of them.

They were satisfied that he was as much of a villain as they could ever hope to be.

And Hamilton felt that he was in duty bound to cast his lot with the robber band. The part he had played in the murder was enough to give the men a hold upon him. Besides, he was satisfied that his superior education would place him at the head of the gang eventually, and there would be money in that.

"It are dangerous travelin' here," said Hank. "If you don't know the way through here you'd like as not stumble an' fall in some place, like ther boy did."

"How far is your hang-out from here?" asked Hamilton, shrugging his shoulders uneasily.

"Not far; but jist far enough to keep all ther officers in creation from findin' it."

At that moment they heard a crashing in the bushes near them, and the next moment Tom Haddock appeared before them.

"I'm going with you!" panted the boy. "I can't go back to the school now."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RESULT OF THE PAPER CHASE.

Lou and Harry had kept up with the foremost boys in the paper chase.

Like the rest of them, they desired to win the prize, if possible, and each felt that they had a good show.

There were plenty of good runners in the crowd, but the majority of them got tired before three miles of the trail had been covered.

Many of them dropped out altogether before the Haunted Woods was reached, some because they were tired, and others because they were afraid to risk going near the quagmires.

Our two young friends made a spurt shortly after entering the woods, and in three minutes' time they were far ahead of their shouting companions.

Harry soon began to lag, however, and a few seconds later slackened his speed.

"There is no use in me spurting with you, Lou," said he. "Go ahead and win the gold medal; I'll try to come in for the silver one. They can't be very far ahead of us now."

Lou continued running for about an eighth of a mile, when he suddenly came upon Will Haddock, who was just emerging from a clump of bushes in an apparently dazed manner.

"Hello, there!" exclaimed our hero, and then he made a grab for the boy with the sack of paper.

But his foot caught in the root of a tree at that instant and he fell heavily to the ground, the fall stunning him.

When he opened his eyes a couple of minutes later Harry Hatcher was bending over him.

"What is the matter?" questioned his friend. "Are you hurt, Lou?"

"No, but I had a bad fall, though. I tripped just as I was going to lay hands upon Will Haddock. We are closer to them than I expected. Go and catch them; never mind me."

"Not much! We will go together. Come on!"

Lou staggered to his feet and started over the trail again. He was pretty well shaken up from the fall, but otherwise was as good as ever.

The two followed the trail a little distance from the road, and then back upon it.

Once they caught sight of a fleeing figure ahead of them, which they knew must be one of the Haddocks.

A dozen or more boys, under the lead of Scofield, were now pretty close behind them, and they were making the welkin ring with their shouts.

"We have got to move lively," panted our hero. "If Scofield should happen to make a good spurt now he will get there ahead of us. I—Great Jupiter! What does this mean?"

The two boys came to a halt and gazed blankly at each other.

And no wonder! The trail had come to an end right in the middle of the road.

"Tom and Will Haddock have played a nice trick upon us," growled Harry. "Rather than allow us to win the prizes, they have stopped throwing out the paper."

"That is just about the size of it," assented Lou. "Well, we were the first to reach the end of the trail, anyhow."

There was no use of going any farther, so, seating themselves on a fallen tree at the side of the road, they waited for the rest to come up.

The next minute Scofield and his crowd arrived, and when they saw how matters stood there was a general feeling of disgust among them.

"Well, we may as well go back to the academy and report to old Hag," said one of the boys. "The Haddocks are, no doubt, somewhere in the bushes laughing at us, and we won't give them the satisfaction of hunting them up."

The boys agreed to this, and without further argument they started slowly homeward.

It was past five o'clock when they arrived at the academy, and the professor was on the porch to meet them.

"Well, who won the prizes?" he asked, as he glanced at the tired throng of scholars.

"No one," responded Scofield. "Ashfield and Hatcher would have been the winners if the Haddocks had not quit throwing out the paper. They gave us a chase away into the Haunted Woods, and then made fools of us."

"Is this true, boys?" questioned the old man, gazing at them keenly.

"It is!" came the unanimous rejoinder.

"So Thomas and William Haddock have spoiled the paper chase, have they? Well, I shall call them to account when they return."

With these words the professor entered the house in a very angry frame of mind.

He had appointed the Haddocks to make the trail just because they had been dropped from the ball nine, and he thought this would appease them somewhat.

But now they had spoiled the whole thing—out of spite, it seemed to him—and he resolved to punish them severely.

When supper time came the Haddocks had not arrived, and Prof. Haggard's temper did not improve any.

Shortly after the evening meal a team drove up to the academy, and a note was sent in to the professor requesting that he allow the three boys who had seen the robbers in the woods to come to the house of Col. Cleverton.

Of course the old man was willing to do this. Anything that would give his school a little notoriety just suited him, so he promptly notified the boys to get ready to make the call.

A few minutes later Lou, Harry and Scofield were seated in

Col. Cleverton's barouche, while it whirled in the direction of its owner's handsome country residence.

When they got there they learned that the colonel had hired a detective to hunt down the robbers, and that he wanted them to give a description of the two men.

This they did as minutely as they could, and then they were ready to return to the academy.

Before they could leave, however, Hazel Cleverton appeared on the scene, and taking Lou by the hand, introduced him to her father as the brave young man who had saved her life.

"You're a lucky fellow, Ashfield," said Scofield, as they were on their way back. "If that pretty girl has not fallen dead in love with you I don't know my own name!"

"That is just what the matter is!" chimed in Harry.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed our hero; "you fellows don't know what you are talking about."

Of course they teased him more or less all the way homeward, but Lou took it good-naturedly.

When they entered the academy they learned that the Haddock brothers had not arrived yet.

And so it was the next morning.

The professor's anger had now turned to alarm, and he concluded to send out a searching party for the missing boys.

But before he could do this one of the Haddocks arrived.

It was Tom. He was pale and haggard, and a frightened look shone from his eyes.

"Where is your brother, Thomas?" demanded the professor.

"He is dead," faltered the boy. "He fell into the quagmire of the Haunted Woods!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SWAMP ANGELS.

The two robbers had led Hamilton and Tom Haddock along a dangerous path for perhaps a mile.

Then they came to a swamp, in the center of which was a little island with a dense growth of shrubbery upon it.

Hank and Mike jumped nimbly from bog to bog, and their companions followed them closely.

"Step exactly in our tracks, or you'll be a gone goose!" observed Mike. "One of our fellers fell in here onct, an' afore we could turn ter give him a hand he was sucked under."

Tom trembled at this remark. He was thinking of the horrible fate of the boy he had lured to his death a few short minutes before.

"Brace up!" exclaimed Hamilton, who noticed the young villain's uneasiness; "you did the thing nicely, and when we get where we are bound for, I'll fix matters up with you."

"All right," was the rather feeble rejoinder.

A minute later the four stepped upon solid ground, and a unanimous sigh of relief went up.

"It ain't sich an awful job to git here after all, is it?" said Hank, with a grin.

"I don't know about that," replied Hamilton. "I shouldn't like to attempt it alone."

"You could make it all right after you was showed twice, if you was careful," spoke up Mike. "Now, then, you fellers wait right here a couple of minutes till we go an' tell our gang that we've got a couple with us that are jist as bad as we are."

Hamilton winced slightly at this. He was more of a scoundrel than either of the robbers, but he did not like to boast of it.

And Tom Haddock, in a state of nervous fright, scarcely noticed what Mike said at all.

While the two robbers were gone, Hamilton hastily took a roll of bills from his pocket.

"Here is the money," he whispered; and, true to his word, he handed Tom the amount.

The boy took the blood money and placed it in his pocket just in time to escape being seen by Hank and Mike, who came through the bushes the next moment.

"It are all right!" exclaimed one of the villains; "come on an' join ther Swamp Angels."

Hamilton nodded, and then they proceeded through an opening in the bushes and came in sight of a good-sized log cabin.

Half a dozen rough-looking men were standing in front of it in an expectant manner.

"Here are ther new recruits!" sang out Hank. "Brother Swamp Angels, Mike an' me knows that they are the right kind of stuff."

"Good enough!" growled one of the men.

Hamilton came forward and shook each of the men by the hand in a familiar way, and then proceeded to relate a story of his career of crooked business in the city.

"There is no longer any room for me where I was," he went on, lying as often as he told the truth; "so, as I accidentally came upon two of your men, it occurred to me that I might be of some benefit to your gang, and, at the same time, get in the way of making some good money for myself."

"We are in need of a shrewd feller ter go around an' locate ther places for us to haul, so I guess you'll do; but what about ther boy?"

As the leader of the Swamp Angels spoke he fixed his eyes upon Tom Haddock.

"Oh, he will be handy to have around in case you want to put anybody out of the way," returned Hamilton. "Young as he is, he is the best I ever saw at the business."

Haddock did not appear to be pleased with this compliment, but he said nothing.

"Well, come inside," said the leader, after a pause, during which he was studying the countenances of the two strangers.

Hamilton boldly followed the men through the doorway, and, as a matter of course, Tom went with him.

One of the gang produced a jug and some glasses, and soon each of the party had a stiff horn of whiskey in hand.

Haddock drained his at a single gulp, and his courage began to return.

When he had tossed off another drink he felt more like himself, and he grew quite talkative.

"I like a good drink of whiskey now and then," said he; "and I am not like my brother, who cannot drink a quarter's worth without getting drunk."

"By the way," interposed Hamilton, "what did you do with Will?"

"Left him lying in the woods, so drunk that he couldn't move. Perhaps the paper chase fellows aroused him and caught him; and if they didn't he will know enough to go back to the academy when he wakes up and finds he is alone. Ha, ha, ha! getting drunk on half a pint of whiskey! Why, I could drink a quart, I believe."

"Have some more," observed Hank, as he passed the jug.

Tom took another. Then each of the villains insisted on his drinking with them.

He managed to go the round, and then, in spite of his boast of a few minutes before, he tumbled to the ground in fully as bad a state as he had left his brother.

The Swamp Angels dragged him into a corner, and then a couple of packs of cards were brought out.

Hamilton was delighted at this move. He was an adept in the art of gambling, if such a thing can be called an art.

It was late into the night when the men put away the cards, with Hamilton a heavy winner.

All were intoxicated, and one by one they lay down and went to sleep.

Believing in the time-honored saying that "there is honor among thieves," Hamilton followed their example.

The first to stir shortly after the break of day was Tom Haddock.

With swollen face and a terrible headache, he staggered to his feet.

In his befuddled state it took him a minute or two to realize where he was.

At length it all came to him, and then, in a feverish state, he began searching for a drink of water.

He made so much noise that he aroused one of the men, who, seeing that it was daylight, awakened the others.

After the whiskey had been passed around one of them started a fire, and proceeded to cook breakfast.

When Haddock had put away a can of coffee he expressed a desire to go back to the academy.

"I will tell them I got lost in the swamp," said he.

"And be sure that you don't say where you stopped all night," added Hank.

"No fear of that!" exclaimed the boy; "you know too much about me."

Mike agreed to conduct him safely across the bogs, so they set out.

"When we want you for anything we'll let you know," said he, as they parted near the spot where the murder had been committed.

Haddock waited until Mike's foot steps had died out, and then, curious to see if there was any sign of the body of his victim, he crept to the edge of the quagmire.

With trembling hands he pulled the bushes aside.

And then a gurgling cry left his lips and he fell back in a faint.

And no wonder. Lying upon the surface of the slimy ooze was his brother's hat and the bag of paper he had carried.

It was Will Haddock who had met his death in the quagmire, and not Lou Ashfield.

It was fully ten minutes before Tom came to, and then, with one more look at the articles he recognized so well, he started on a run for the Benley Academy.

How he managed to get there he never knew, but he did, and made the startling announcement that his brother had perished in the quagmire of the Haunted Woods.

CHAPTER XIX.

LOU MAKES SCOFIELD HAPPY.

A shade of gloom came over the scholars of Benley Academy as Tom Haddock made the startling announcement that his brother Will had perished.

It occurred to them that they had judged the brothers too harshly, and they were sorry for it.

Even the face of Prof. Haggard turned pale.

"How did it happen, Thomas?" he asked, after a period of deathly silence.

"I don't know how," was the reply. "I got lost and could not find my way out till daylight this morning. I accidentally came across poor Will's hat and the bag he carried in the paper chase. He's dead! he's dead! Oh, my!"

The boy broke into a fit of weeping, and at that moment there was not a person in the room who did not sympathize with him.

Haddock refused to be comforted, and asked permission to go to his room.

The professor granted this request readily enough, and when Daggs went up at noon he found him in a raging fever.

The Benley boys did not feel in a sportive humor that day. The result of the paper chase had cast a temporary gloom upon them.

The death of Will Haddock was reported to the village authorities, but the body could not be recovered, though they tried hard enough, and his relatives were notified.

Tom, who was suffering with a severe attack of brain fever, knew nothing of what was taking place; in fact, the physician would not allow him to be removed from his room in the academy.

His father, who had been sent for, engaged a competent nurse for him, and went on back to his business in his native town.

There was nothing very strange in this action, as he was not very wealthy, and was pretty well bossed by his second wife.

Things went along quietly for a week. The villains who had robbed Col. Cleverton had not been captured, and even the detective who had been put on the case acknowledged himself completely baffled.

Hamilton must have concluded to bide his time after discovering that the wrong boy had been murdered in the swamp; or else he was waiting for Tom Haddock to recover before making another attempt upon the life of our hero.

Meantime the bicycle "craze" struck the Benley Academy, and about three-fourths of the boys became possessors of wheels.

Of course the sporting fraternity of Fenton were not going to be behind, and, realizing that the academy would most likely develop some crack racers, they put their best men in training and arranged for a grand bicycle race to take place on election day in November.

Both Lou and Harry had new wheels, as a matter of course, and they soon became the leading fast riders of the school.

Scotfield was less fortunate than the majority of the boys. His father could not very well afford to buy him a bicycle, though he wanted one badly enough.

One day after he came in from a spin on Lou's wheel he pulled a circular from his pocket and exclaimed:

"Lou, if I could ride like you I wouldn't be long without a wheel. Look at this!"

Our hero took the handbill, and saw it announced the bicycle races the Fenton people had arranged to take place. The first prize was a high-grade bicycle, the second a wheel of inferior quality, and the third a breech-loading shotgun.

The contest was open to all, so it read.

Of course there were lots of other races set down, minor prizes being offered to the winners.

But the principal race was a five-mile contest.

Our hero read the contents of the handbill, and then, placing his hand on Scotfield's shoulder, said:

"Old fellow, I'll win one of those bicycles, and if I do it shall be yours!"

"What!" cried the young captain of the ball nine; "do you mean that, Lou Ashfield?"

"I certainly do. Go and find Hitcher and tell him I want to see him at once."

With tears of joy glistening on his cheeks, Scotfield started on his errand. He had such confidence in Lou's riding that he could already see himself the owner of the prize wheel, and he pictured to himself how he would look riding it.

He soon found Harry and delivered Lou's message.

"What is it, old man?" asked Hitcher, as he approached our hero.

"Get your wheel; I want you to ride over to Fenton with me."

"Certainly. Anything up?"

"Yes; I am going to enter the five-mile bicycle race, and I want you to do the same."

"By Jove! I am with you. What are the prizes?"

"Bicycles—a high and low grade—for first and second place, and a shotgun for third."

"One of us ought to stand a good show of winning."

"That's just it. I've promised Scofield to make him a present of first prize, if I win it."

"If you win first, I'll come in second. You know you only beat me by a length the other day when we made the five miles."

"Yes, and our time was less than fourteen minutes, over a rough road at that. Have confidence, old fellow, and Scofield will be riding a wheel of his own this day week."

Lou glanced at his watch and saw that they could easily get to Fenton and back by six o'clock.

Harry got his bicycle and the two mounted and rode off.

They reached their destination in good time, and had no trouble in finding the secretary of the Fenton Athletic Club.

He seemed pleased to have them enter as contestants for the five-mile race, and coaxed Lou to go in on the one-mile handicap.

After a while the boy consented, and then the secretary was doubly pleased, as he knew the Benley boys would draw a big crowd when it became known that some of them were to compete in the races.

The club was under a heavy expense, and, of course, they desired to take in all the gate money they could.

On the way back the boys overtook Col. Cleverton, his wife and their daughter Hazel, who were enjoying a drive.

The consequence was that a stop was made and a few minutes' conversation followed.

Lou told them Harry and himself had entered in the bicycle races, and that he hoped to see them all there.

"We will be there, never fear," said the pretty Hazel. "My cousin Reginald is to be one of the contestants also, and he feels sure of winning the first prize in the five-mile race."

"Yes, you will have to look out for him, for, to use the vulgar term, he is quite a scorcher," added the colonel.

"Well, if either Harry or I are lucky enough to come in first or second we have agreed to give the prize to a school-fellow whose father cannot afford to buy a wheel for him!" retorted Lou.

"I hope you will win it, Lou!" exclaimed Hazel, as they parted company. "Reginald says if he captures the bicycle he is going to sell it to a young man in Fenton for fifty dollars."

"Reginald is quite a financier," observed her father, with a smile. "Well, boys, make it a contest worth driving down to see."

"We will do our best, sir," said the two boys in a breath.

"So the dude is going to ride, eh?" observed Hitcher, as they turned down the road leading to the academy. "I shouldn't be surprised if he can put up a pretty good gait."

"We will try his mettle," replied his companion. "I suppose he would dislike me worse than ever if I should beat him."

CHAPTER XX.

THE BICYCLE RACE.

The day for the great race at Fenton soon came, and nearly every person for miles around was on the tiptoe of excitement.

Lou and Harry were in excellent shape and felt confident of success.

The programme showed seven entries for the five-mile race, two from Benley, Reginald Munsey, three from Fenton and an unknown.

The latter was no other than Hamilton. He was quite an expert at wheeling, and when the craze struck that part of the country he purchased a bicycle.

He divided his time between going about the country picking out houses and stores for the Swamp Angels to rob, and hanging about Fenton.

About once a week he would pay a visit to the little island in the swamp, and every time he did he came back well supplied with money.

The villain entered the bicycle contest, not with the idea of winning, but for the express purpose of colliding with our hero, with the intention of killing him.

Hamilton did not blame Tom Haddock for the mistake he had made, but he did get tired of waiting for the young murderer to get well.

Consequently he concluded to finish the job himself.

Being affable and polite, the villain had a great many friends in Fenton, and some of these expected to see him win the race.

The whole Benley contingent came to see the affair, even to the professor and his assistants.

Half an hour before the first event the seats near the track were pretty well filled, and everybody was in good humor.

The first race was a half mile, which was won by Reginald Munsey, who was entered for three races besides the five-mile.

The dude rode with such ease that Lou and Harry could but admire his style.

"He is going to give us a good rub for the prize bicycle," remarked our hero.

"I don't think so," replied Hitcher. "I have an idea that his wind is only good for a couple of miles."

Which of the two was right will be seen later on.

The second event was for boys of thirteen or under, and after this came the five-mile race.

The boys' race created no little amusement for the spectators, but when the next and principal event was announced a hush came over them.

Lou Ashfield was the favorite among the Benley crowd, and a young fellow named Walton was the idol of the Fenton Athletic Club.

The rest of the contestants had more or less admirers and backers, and each boy hoped to come in at least second.

Tom Haddock was there under the special charge of the professor. It was the first time he had been off the academy grounds since his illness, and he looked wan and pale.

The young rascal was thunderstruck when he saw that the unknown was Hamilton, or Myers, as he knew him.

"What does he mean?" he thought. "He must be here to put an end to Ashfield. Well, I hope he does; it will save me the trouble, then."

Haddock's sickness had not served to make a better boy of him. On the contrary, he hated our hero worse than ever, if possible.

The seven racers got ready and the pistol cracked.

"They're off!" shouted the crowd.

And so they were, Fenton's favorite leading from the start.

Lou dropped in just ahead of Reginald Munsey, who was well in the rear.

It was a third-of-a-mile track, and when two miles had been covered there were but four in the race.

These were Lou, Harry, Reginald Munsey and Walton.

Hamilton had been foiled in his attempt to collide with our hero, not being able to catch him at the start.

But the villain was rendered desperate, and he meant to do something before the race was over, if it were possible for him to do it without being detected.

Walton still had the lead, with Harry Hitcher a close second. Lou had allowed Munsey to drop in third place, and he brought up the rear.

Round and round the track the riders sped, keeping their positions until the last time around.

Then Reginald Munsey made a magnificent spurt and shot to the front.

A deafening shout went up at this; but a moment later the crowd became as silent as a mouse.

Lou Ashfield was creeping to the front like a whirlwind.

Whizz-whirr! The spinning wheels of his bicycle made sweet music to his ears, and, gritting hard upon his teeth, he pressed the pedals as he had never done before.

Munsey tried to hold his own, but it was no use. Lou shot past him and gained a lead of fully ten feet.

Harry Hitcher tried his best to follow the example set by his friend, but he could do no better than to gain third position.

All four settled down to do their best, but they finished just as they were.

When Scofield saw our hero across the line an easy winner he led the Benley boys in a cheer that awoke the echoes for miles around.

Then, unable to restrain himself, he jumped down upon the track and embraced Lou.

Hamilton and Tom Haddock were gnashing their teeth in rage at the result, and Reginald Munsey was in a not much better humor.

"I've been balked in every idea I've had to-day," muttered Hamilton; "but there is one more thing to try. The prize shotgun!"

A devilish scheme had come into his head.

He knew the prizes would be given out as soon as the winners had cooled off, and in a sneaking manner he made his way to the place where he knew the gun could be found.

As it happened there was nobody there at that moment, and opening the box of cartridges that went with the prize gun, he took two and thrust them into the breech, snapping it into place again.

"Now, then, when the winners and their friends are examining the prizes, that gun must go off, with its muzzle pointed directly at Lou Ashfield's breast!" he thought, as he sneaked out into the crowd again.

A few minutes later he was standing on the track as one of the seven contestants who had been called there by the manager of the race.

The high-grade bicycle was turned over to Lou, Reginald Munsey received the low-grade machine, and the gun was handed to Harry Hitcher.

Of course all of the contestants desired to examine the prizes, and at length it came Hamilton's turn to get the gun in his hands.

He contrived to get its muzzle leveled directly at our hero's heart, not two feet from him, and then he asked the manager if it was loaded.

"No; certainly not," was the reply.

Without another word the villain pressed both triggers.

CHAPTER XXI.

HAMILTON IS FOILED.

As Hamilton pressed the triggers of the gun with murderous intent, no report, or even a click, followed.

"What is the matter with the locks?" asked the manager of the races, and before the villain knew it the prize shotgun was taken from his hands.

A feeling of rage and disappointment came over the would-be murderer. From some unknown cause he had been foiled again.

Full of curiosity at the weapon's failure to snap, a crowd collected about the manager while he examined it.

"Somebody has broken the springs in both locks!" he cried. "Who could have done this? I will swear that the gun was in perfect working order before the races started."

"I saw Jack Tucker sneak into the place where the prizes were," spoke up one of the villagers. "He was awful mad because he didn't win the gun, and I heard him say if he couldn't have it no one else would have any good of it."

At this remark a freckled boy was seen to move off as though he had important business on hand.

This was Tucker. He had punctured his rear tire on the second time around, and thus lost all chances of winning either of the prizes.

It was he, sure enough, who had sneaked in and smashed the locks of the gun, just because he wanted it so bad and was unable to win it.

And Hamilton had placed the cartridges in it less than two minutes after, neither being aware of each other's action.

But Tucker had been seen, and what little reputation he had possessed was gone.

He left the track in disgrace, and Hamilton breathed a sigh of relief.

The cartridges were discovered soon enough, and Tucker was blamed for putting them there, though no one thought he did it for the purpose of injuring any one, since in smashing the locks he rendered it impossible for them to be discharged.

All unconscious of the fact that an attempt on his life had been made, Lou wheeled the prize bicycle through the crowd until he came to Scofield.

"Here you are, old fellow," said he. "I told you I would win it for you!"

"And you really mean to give it to me?" asked Scofield, delightedly.

"Give it to you! Didn't I promise you that the wheel was to be yours if I won it? You never caught me going back on my word, did you?"

"No, Lou, I never did; but it seems too good to be true. My! it is a beauty, isn't it? I'll try and pay you back for this some day."

"Don't mention it. I have a first-class wheel, as you know, and this one is of no use to me. Take it now, and be happy."

Scofield accepted the gift with tears in his eyes, and thanked our hero time and again for his generosity.

Reginald Munsey took possession of the second prize with as good grace as possible, but it was quite evident that he felt very sore.

Unlike the rest of the contestants, he did not congratulate the winner of the first prize, but walked away with the low-grade bicycle as though he did not care whether he owned it or not.

Meanwhile Hamilton moved away from the crowd, and, unable to resist the temptation of speaking to him, Tom Haddock made his way to the villain's side.

"You here!" exclaimed Hamilton. "I did not know you were out of bed yet. I am glad to see you, though, I am sure."

"Oh, Mr. Myers, it was an awful mistake that I made that day!" began Tom. But Hamilton interrupted him.

"Don't speak of that here," said he. "How are you getting along, anyhow? You appear to be rather feeble."

"So I am, but in a couple of weeks from now I hope to be all right again. And then, Mr. Myers"—the boy lowered his voice to a whisper—"and then I'll finish the job I undertook."

"Ashfield has more lives than a cat," retorted Hamilton, in a low tone, "but he must be settled, even if I have to stay around here till Christmas. I have sent for more money, and when the job is done I'll whack up some of it with you. Ah! another race is about to start. It is the one-mile handicap, and Ashfield is scratch man. He is just lucky enough to win it."

"Of course," and a gleam of hate shot from Haddock's eyes, "of course he'll win. He is first in everything he undertakes."

After promising to meet Hamilton a week from that day, Tom Haddock made his way back from the grand stand, while the baffled villain left the grounds, satisfied that there was no use in making another attempt that day.

When Haddock got back to his seat the race had started.

He watched it with a black look on his face, because he saw Lou Ashfield rapidly drawing near the bunch of riders ahead of him.

Lou overtook them at the two-third mark and kept close to the leader until a hundred yards from the finish. Then his legs began to work like the piston rods of a flying locomotive, and he darted ahead.

Fifteen feet ahead of the second man he crossed the line, and a cheer went up for the "scratch" man.

Lou received a gold medal for winning this event, and he was more than satisfied with the result of his entering the races.

Harry Hitcher had expected to come in second in the five-mile race, but he took his defeat gracefully, saying that Reginald Munsey was a faster rider than he was.

The manager promised to have the gun put in proper shape and sent to him, and Harry contented himself with the thought of going squirrel hunting on Saturday.

When the races were over the Benley boys immediately started for home, Scofield riding the prize wheel past the envious crowd of Fenton boys with a feeling of pride.

He rode it to the academy, along with the rest of the "bikers," and when he dismounted he declared the wheel to be a genuine "daisy."

That evening Prof. Haggard received a visit from Reginald Munsey.

The dude introduced himself as the nephew of Col. Cleverton, and the winner of the second prize in the five-mile race.

"Professor," said he, "I—aw—came down to inform you that I would—aw—like to present the—aw—wheel I won to one of your—aw—scholars who is not fortunate enough to possess one. I am the—aw—son of a rich man, and therefore have no—aw—use for a bicycle of inferior make."

The professor was just the sort of a man to appreciate this kind of talk, and he very eloquently thanked him for his generosity.

In truth, it was not generosity on the part of Munsey. He was in love with his fair cousin, and he had got tired of hearing her praise Lou Ashfield for his kindness in giving the bicycle he won to a poor academy boy. So he concluded to show her that he could do the same, and that was why he drove over to make the present.

"Let me see," mused the professor, after Munsey had taken his departure, "what particular boy shall I give the bicycle to? Ah,

there is poor Thomas Haddock. He shall have it if he will accept it."

Sure enough, the next day Haddock became the possessor of the wheel, and it was given out that Reginald Munsey was the donor.

It is needless to say that Hazel Cleverton did not think any more of her cousin for his act, as she knew he was but trying to imitate the example of Lou Ashfield.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DETECTIVE STRIKES A CLEW.

Two weeks passed. Everything went along smoothly at Benley Academy. Lou and Harry improved their time and kept up in their studies.

Scofield employed all his spare moments riding his bicycle, and Tom Haddock was just able to ride his.

But bad weather was coming now. It was just the middle of November, and the bicycles had to be laid aside for the winter.

The boys now began to think of skating. Already ice had frozen thick enough to bear the weight of a man, but they were waiting for the river to close up solid.

A cold wave struck that section of country, and their desire was gratified much sooner than they expected.

Thanksgiving Day the river was pronounced safe, and the boys got ready for a day of genuine sport.

Lou, Harry, Scofield and Dixon had constructed an ice boat according to the plans and diagrams laid out in a book they had purchased.

They put a little of their own ideas in the building of it, and when it was ready for trial the boat was pronounced to be a beauty.

Lou got permission of Hazel Cleverton to name it after her, so the pretty little craft was called the *Hazel*.

Of course there were more or less ice boats at Fenton. The frozen river offered such an inducement that ice boating and skating were the principal sports during the winter months.

As a natural consequence there were two or three "flyers" among them, and when the quartet who owned the *Hazel* boarded their craft early Thanksgiving morning to take a run up to Fenton, they meant to have a brush with some one, if possible.

There was a brisk breeze from the northwest, and the *Hazel* scudded along like a thing of life.

When they had made about half the distance to Fenton they met one of the crack flyers owned by the Fenton Athletic Club, which immediately luffed and came upon the windward side of them, evidently with the intention of giving them a brush.

Lou had the tiller, and with glowing cheeks he entered into the spirit of the thing and let the *Hazel* out.

Away sped the two racers, all the other boats and the few skaters who were taking advantage of an early morning spin getting out of their way.

For the first mile it was nip and tuck, and then the *Hazel* began to slowly draw ahead.

Harry threw out a piece of rope in a tantalizing manner, as though he was offering to give the other boat a tow, and those aboard took it with apparent good humor.

When Fenton was reached the *Hazel* was twenty yards ahead, and the other boat gave up the race.

"This will mean a challenge from the club, if they have a better boat," said our hero, as he brought the craft around and started back for Benley.

"Sure!" echoed his three companions.

As they neared their destination they saw Tom Haddock skat-

ing with a man, whom they quickly recognized as the one who had been in the bicycle race.

"I wonder who that man is?" said Lou. "It seems to me that I have seen him somewhere before I came to the academy. Somehow I don't like his looks. What can Haddock be talking so earnestly to him for?"

"For no good, I'll wager," returned Hitcher. "See! they are sneaking away, as though they were afraid we will see them."

This was indeed the case. Hamilton, for it was he, sure enough, caught Haddock by the arm the instant he saw the four boys looking at them, and the pair then skated up the river.

In order to learn what new plan they were devising, we will follow them.

"That was Ashfield aboard the ice boat, wasn't it?" asked Hamilton, when they had rounded a curve in the river.

"Yes," returned Tom; "he is one of the owners of the boat; he and the three with him built it themselves. I suppose it will be the fastest on the river, for Ashfield is ahead in everything he undertakes. He has even proved himself too much for us, so far."

"He could be done away with easy enough, but the job must be done so there will be no cause of suspicion against any one," said the villain who had been hired to put our hero out of the way by his uncle.

"With one exception, I think everybody is friendly toward him save us; and I cannot understand why it is. I never saw anything about Lou Ashfield to admire."

"Of course not," retorted Hamilton. "He is nothing but a fresh young upstart, who has more luck than brains. By the way, who is the other person who does not like him?"

"Reginald Munsey, the dude who is at Col. Cleverton's more than half his time. Ashfield is a little sweet on the fair Hazel, and Munsey hates him worse than poison for it."

"I suppose we could blow the infernal young hound's head off and let the blame rest upon the dude," exclaimed Hamilton, in his usual heartless manner.

Bad as he was, Haddock did not approve of this.

"That would not be right," said he.

"Right!" echoed his companion. "Do such as you and I believe in things that are right? What should we care, so long as we gain our point? You are getting good, it seems. You must come over to the hut in the swamp this afternoon and get coached a little. You needn't be afraid of the quagmire now. Everything is frozen as hard as a rock."

"I can't come over very well to-day," faltered Haddock, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"You must, and when I say must I mean it. Now will you come?"

"Ye-es," was the reply.

"Well, don't forget, then. We will arrange to have the job done to-night. Don't fail, if you value your good reputation."

Tom winced at this remark, but promised to be there without fail.

A minute later the two parted company, Hamilton skating in the direction of Fenton, and the villainous boy making for the academy.

They had scarcely disappeared around the curve when a man skated from behind a pile of bushes and struck out leisurely up the river.

It was the detective Col. Cleverton had engaged to hunt down the robbers. The colonel was a peculiar man, and he meant to have the thieves brought to justice if it took a year to do it, regardless of the cost.

The detective, who went by the name of Hunt, had been on

the trail of Hamilton for a week or more, because he had learned that on some occasions he would have plenty of money, and at others be without a cent.

He figured that it was just possible that this man was one of the thieves who were supposed to be located somewhere in the county, but up to this time he had been unable to obtain a single clew that would come anywhere near substantiating his belief.

Hunt had reached the pile of bushes just in time to hear Tom Haddock agree to pay a visit to the hut in the swamp, and there was an expression of extreme satisfaction on his face.

"I have struck the right clew at last," he muttered, as his skates clicked over the ice. "I know it, for something tells me so. This boy, whose brother was lost in the quagmire, is in with the gang, is he? Well, when he reaches the hut in the swamp, wherever it may be, I won't be many feet behind him. I'll bring matters to a focus, and then I guess my boss will be satisfied with having paid me fifty dollars a week since I have been here."

The detective was an adept at disguises, and shortly after the noon hour he was skating up and down the river in front of the academy, made up like a countryman.

His sharp eyes were on the watch continually, and shortly after one o'clock he saw Tom Haddock come down to the river and put on his skates.

"Now for the hut in the woods," thought the detective. "This is going to be an unpleasant Thanksgiving Day for somebody."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A COUPLE OF PRANKS.

"Turkey and pumpkin pie to-day!" exclaimed Daggs, as he met our four young friends, after they had put their ice boat away for the morning.

"Do you like that kind of feed?" asked Lou, addressing the man-of-all-work.

"Do I?" and Daggs rolled his eyes and stroked his stomach in an affectionate manner; "why, I wish Thanksgiving came twice every week! But, if it did, ther professor couldn't afford it. He'd have to charge more for boarding you young gentlemen."

A desire to have a little fun suddenly came upon Lou.

"Let us play a joke on Daggs," he whispered to his companions, as the man walked away.

"What shall we do?" asked Scofield.

"Leave it to me; I'll think up something in a few minutes."

"If you can fix it up so the professor will come in for a share, I'll go in with you, heart and soul," observed Harry Hitcher.

"I guess we can arrange it. Come on! We will go around to the kitchen and see the cook."

Wondering what he was up to, Lou's three companions followed him around to the rear of the building, where the kitchen was located.

"How are you, cookey?" said he. "Going to give us something good for dinner to-day?"

"Law sakes, Master Ashfield! How you did startle me!" exclaimed the cook. "Don't you know that you boys ain't allowed in the kitchen?"

"Oh, that's all right, my fair one. We can come in and look around, can't we?" and he tossed a quarter to her as he spoke.

"Well, I s'pose you kin come in. But the professor must not know it."

"Surely not."

A minute later the four were busily engaged in watching the cook at her work.

Presently Lou's eyes lighted upon a mouse trap that contained a live mouse.

"What are you saving this fellow for, cookey?" questioned he.
 "Law, Master Ashfield, I was waitin' for ther cat to come in."
 "May I have the mouse?"
 "Why, what do you want it for?"
 "Makes no difference. Can I have it?"
 "Yes, if you won't let it out in ther kitchen."
 "Oh, I won't let it out here, never fear."

Picking up the trap, Lou bade his companions wait until he came back, and then he opened the door that led into the dining-room.

The room was unoccupied, but the tables were spread with the necessary crockery for dinner.

Our hero knew exactly where the professor always sat, and, without hesitation, he hurried to the place.

In the twinkling of an eye he had the mouse out of the trap, and under the professor's plate.

"There," he chuckled, "when the old man goes to turn his plate over to get his soup he'll be greatly surprised. The cook will hardly give me away, because she had no right to allow us in the kitchen."

"What did you do with the mouse?" asked Lou's three waiting companions, when he returned with the empty trap.

"Just wait until dinner time and see," was all the reply he gave them.

In vain did they question him; he invariably changed the subject.

At length he fished out an empty wine bottle from behind the cupboard.

"Now, we'll go for Daggs. I'll show you how to make him 'swear off' drinking for a day of two."

"What are you up to, Master Ashfield?" asked the cook, as Lou seized the big vinegar jug and began filling the bottle from it.

"Nothing, cookey; just give me about an ounce of red pepper now, and don't you ever think of mentioning that we were in the kitchen."

"Don't worry, I shan't," and she handed him the article he wanted.

The red pepper was soon poured into the bottle of vinegar, and all three of our hero's companions began to grin.

They had an idea of what was likely to occur if Daggs undertook to drink the supposed wine in the bottle.

"Well shaken before taken!" exclaimed Lou. "Come on, fellows—but wait. Give me the cork on the table, and then hand that towel here so I can wipe the bottle. Ah! now we are ready."

The four now left the kitchen and walked slowly in the direction of the stable, where Daggs was looking after the wants of the horses.

"Hello, Daggs!" said our hero. "Where have you been? Col. Cleverton's coachman has just been here asking for you. He was in a dreadful hurry, and when he could not find you he handed us this bottle of wine, instructing us to tell you to take it to the professor, with the compliments of the colonel."

"It's funny I didn't see him," replied Daggs, as he took the bottle and looked at it affectionately. "I don't know where I could have been. I'll take it right in, young gentlemen."

"All right, Daggs; we are going down to the river to take another spin on our ice boat before dinner."

But instead of going to the river the four made their way softly to the rear of the barn, where there was an open window.

Peering inside, they beheld Daggs standing near one of the stalls, with the bottle in his hand.

"I wonder if I dare taste of this?" they heard him mutter.

Then he began fooling with the cork, and a moment later had it out.

The next minute he placed the bottle to his mouth and took three or four big swallows.

An expression of the most profound astonishment came over his face, which was quickly followed by a howl. The bottle fell from his hands and was shattered, while Daggs lay down and proceeded to roll about in agony.

"I'm pizened!" he yelled, and then, during a lull, a shout of laughter came to his ears.

That settled it. Daggs knew it all now, and he bore the terrible burning sensation without another murmur.

"Serves him right," remarked Lou, as the boys made their way into the academy building to get warm. "He won't dare to tell the professor of the trick we played on him, so we can have the laugh on him every time we meet him."

The boys lounged about the warm schoolroom until the bell rang for dinner, and then, full of expectancy, they hurried in and took their places.

The tables were spread with a genuine old-fashioned Thanksgiving dinner, and, with mouths that fairly watered, the scholars of Benley Academy waited to begin the attack upon the good things.

Prof. Haggard made a few appropriate remarks and then turned his plate over.

As he did so the mouse, in its eagerness to escape, jumped upon his arm and ran up in the direction of his collar.

"Wough, wough—murder!" cried the old man, throwing himself back just far enough to lose his balance.

Whack! Down he came upon the floor, and, unable to contain themselves, the boys burst into a roar of laughter.

The poor little mouse ran across the floor, and, under the leadership of Lou, the entire school gave chase.

Tom Haddock, thinking it a good opportunity to vent his feelings upon our hero, picked up a knife and deliberately hurled it at his head.

Lou saw the movement just in time to duck his head and escape it, and, strange to say, the knife flew across the room and struck the fleeing mouse, killing it instantly.

"What did you do that for?" demanded Lou, darting forward and seizing Haddock by the collar.

"Why," gasped the young villain, in affecting astonishment, "wasn't you all trying to kill the mouse?"

"You threw that knife at me, Tom Haddock, and it was only by chance that it killed the mouse. If it were not for the fact of your being weak from your sickness, I would thrash you right here!"

At this moment the professor, who had recovered himself, approached and seized Lou by the arm.

"Ashfield," said he, sternly, "I shall punish you for such conduct here in the dining-room. Go to your room and stay there the rest of the day. I will send your dinner to you when the rest are through."

There was no use in trying to beg off, so, slightly crestfallen, our hero was led to his room by Mr. Humber, the assistant, who locked the door and placed the key in his pocket.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HADDOCK KEEPS HIS PROMISE.

Tom Haddock did not linger long at the dinner table that day; he knew our hero caught him in the act of throwing the knife, and all who saw it declared that if Ashfield had not dodged he would have been seriously hurt, or perhaps killed.

But as the knife struck and killed the mouse, no one could positively say the boy intended it for Lou.

Haddock could not disguise his pleasure at the sight of his rival being led from the dining-room to spend the rest of the holiday in solitude.

As the young scoundrel started to leave, in order to keep his appointment with Hamilton, the professor asked him if he knew where the mouse came from.

He would have liked to lay the blame of the little creature's presence upon Lou, but he hardly dared, so he declared his ignorance on the subject.

Tom quickly donned his short, heavy coat and fur cap, and then, skates in hand, he made for the river.

He had quite a distance to cover on the frozen surface of the river before he would come to the road that led through the Haunted Woods, so he skimmed swiftly along.

"I wonder why it is that Myers insisted so strongly on me going to the hut in the swamp?" he thought, as a cold shiver ran down his spine at the recollection of the death of his brother in the treacherous quagmire. "I suppose I have got to do as he wants me, so there is no use in kicking. Anyway, Myers cannot very well refuse any favor I ask of him. We are both in the same boat."

By the time Haddock arrived at the place where he had to take off his skates his mind was pretty well at ease, and the thought of keeping his appointment was no longer obnoxious to him.

He glanced up and down the river to see if anybody was in sight before leaving the ice, and observing but one solitary skater going in the direction of Fenton, he gave a muttered exclamation of satisfaction.

Thrusting a skate in each of his coat pockets, he walked up the sloping bank and hurried to the road.

He knew the way well enough, and in due time he was at the spot where the secret path through the swamp began.

It mattered little where he walked now, as everything was frozen solid, or hard enough to bear the weight of a dozen like him.

"Poor Will's grave is around here somewhere," muttered the boy, "and it is Lou Ashfield's fault, and no one else's under the sun! If ever any one longed for revenge it is I!"

Through the tangled mazes of the dreary woods he pressed, and presently he came in sight of the little island that was inhabited by the Swamp Angels.

He sprang lightly from one frozen bog to another, and at length stood upon the solid ground again.

Then he boldly started for the hut.

Just as he reached it the door opened and Hamilton came out. "So you've got here?" observed the villain, with a smile. "I am glad you are one of the punctual kind, Tom. Step inside; you must be pretty cold."

"I am not very cold; the exercise I had in getting here warmed me considerably," replied Haddock, coolly, as though he was merely calling on a friend to play a game of chess, or something of the sort.

"Well, come in, anyhow. The rest of the gang are there. I told them you were coming, so you need not be bashful in their presence."

Haddock laughed. The idea of him being bashful struck him as rather humorous. It occurred to him that he was as bold and daring as any of the Swamp Angels, and he was bound to make them think so.

So he followed Hamilton into the hut and shook hands in a cordial manner with the villains who arose to greet him.

"Glad to see that you've got all right ag'in," said Hank.

"So am I," added Mike. "You must have had a putty bad spell."

"I was pretty bad, but there was no danger of my dying; I'll never go under until I have settled accounts with Lou Ashfield."

"Talks like a veteran, don't he, cap?" asked Mike.

"Yes," returned Hamilton, much to Tom's surprise.

"How is it you answer to the name of 'cap' now?" asked the boy.

"Oh, the gang wanted me for leader, and I couldn't refuse," was the reply.

"That are right, my boy," spoke up the former captain. "It ain't the right thing for an uneducated cuss like me ter have charge of a gang like this, when there's one who is more capable."

Haddock thought there was just the least tinge of bitterness in the man's tone, but he paid no further attention to him, as Hamilton produced a jug of rum and some glasses.

Tom joined the men in taking a drink of the fiery stuff, and then Hamilton lighted a cigar and got down to business.

"Haddock," said he, "business has been pretty poor with us for the past few weeks, and we have made up our minds that we have got to make a good haul somewhere to-night. I have thought it over since our conversation this morning, and it strikes me that we can make a haul and fix Ashfield at the same stroke. How much money does Prof. Haggard keep in the house?"

"What—what do you mean?" gasped the boy, as it dawned upon him that the Swamp Angels meant to rob the academy.

"Just what I say—how much money does Prof. Haggard keep in the house?"

"I don't know."

"Does he run a bank account?"

"I am not sure, but I think I have heard the professor say he did not believe in banks."

"So much the better for us, then," and Hamilton grinned satisfactorily. "We will strike an excellent pot there, no doubt. Now then, you have got to find where he keeps his money, and let us into the house."

"I?" cried Tom.

"Yes, you. Why, you are no better to do it than any one else, are you?"

"N-no," was the faltering reply. "But how am I to do it?"

"You will find a way, never fear. After we get hold of the swag you must contrive to arouse Lou Ashfield and let him know that there are robbers around. The instant he shows up one of us will shoot him in his tracks. Is it not a good scheme?"

"Yes, it is. I'll do my part!" and Haddock's eyes blazed with hate as he thought of our hero. "But suppose I do not succeed in arousing Ashfield—what then?"

"We will have to postpone his death a day or two and lay the blame upon Reginald Munsey."

Tom shrugged his shoulders. He had accepted a bicycle from Munsey, and he hardly liked the idea of having him accused of a crime he never committed. Yet there was only one way out of it, in case their intended victim failed to appear that night.

"Very well," said he, after a pause. "What time do you propose to be at the academy?"

"Between twelve and one."

"I'll see that you get into the room where the professor's safe is? It is on the ground floor."

"What think you of the plan, men?" asked Hamilton, rising to his feet and looking from one to the other.

"Good!" came the unanimous response.

Their villainous leader then passed the jug around again, and all hands raised their glasses.

But before they could swallow any of the stuff, a startling thing occurred.

There was a crashing sound, and a man fell through the roof of the hut, right into the midst of the lawless crowd.

It was Hunt, the detective.

CHAPTER XXV.

LOU IS SURPRISED.

Lou was not a little humiliated at being led away to his room, but he said not a word to the assistant teacher.

While he felt sure that Tom Haddock threw the knife at him, and with no intention of hitting the mouse, he knew it would be an utter impossibility to make the professor believe it.

"So I am to remain in my room the balance of the day, just because I threatened to give Haddock a thrashing. Well, I guess not. This is a holiday, and the professor had no right to sentence me to such punishment."

The boy had not been in his room over five minutes when a servant came up with his dinner.

The professor had changed his mind about making him wait till the rest had finished, and, being hungry, Lou accepted the food, which was the same as the other boys were eating in the dining-room, and sat down to it.

The servant closed and locked the door after him, but he did not shut it quick enough to escape being hit on the ear by a turkey leg Lou threw at him.

"I hope ther master'll keep you there a week," he bellowed, while our hero grinned, in spite of the fact of his being a prisoner.

Prisoner? As Lou thought of the word he broke into a laugh and nearly choked himself with the cranberry sauce he was putting away.

He meant to leave the room, and building as well, as soon as he had finished his dinner, and he swallowed the food almost without chewing it, in order to hasten the time.

At length his appetite was satisfied, and, rising to his feet, he approached the window.

His room was at the rear of the building, and the window opened directly over the roof of the kitchen, which was slanting and not over twelve feet from the ground at the outer edge.

It was no more trouble for a boy like Lou to leave by that way than it was to go by the ordinary outlet.

Putting on his coat and hat, he picked up his skates and raised the window.

"Now, if I can get as far as the river without being seen by some one who will give me away, I'll be all right," he muttered. But just then it occurred to him that the servant would soon be back after the tray containing the remnants of his dinner, and he would surely notify the professor of his absence.

"I'll make him believe I am asleep in bed," thought the boy, and quickly rolling up the bedclothes, he deposited the bundle lengthwise and spread the outer covering over it.

The bed looked, for all the world, as though it was occupied by a sleeping person, and, with an exclamation of satisfaction, Lou crept out of the window, not forgetting to lower it after him.

Softly he slid down the roof and then dropped lightly to the ground.

Just as he landed the cook came out.

"Law!" she exclaimed; "what did you put that mouse in the dining-room for, Master Ashfield?"

"Never mind the mouse, cookey," returned Lou. "Don't say you saw me—do you hear? I am supposed to be locked in my room."

"I shan't mention it," said the woman, looking at him with distended eyes, as though she could hardly believe he would have the audacity to leave after being locked up.

"All right, then. Ta-ta! I'll see you later, cookey!"

The next instant he was running rapidly in the direction of the river.

He had no sooner reached the boathouse than he heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and not wishing to be seen, he crouched behind the structure.

A moment later he beheld Tom Haddock approach the river and put on his skates.

"I wonder where he is going, all alone?" thought our hero. "By Jove! I think I'll follow the mean rascal and see where he is going."

Lou put on his skates, and after Haddock had gone a safe distance from the boathouse he followed in the same direction.

He had not proceeded any great distance when he noticed a man, who was a stranger to him, going that way, too.

As it was the noon hour there was no one on the ice except these three.

As the reader may suppose, the stranger was no other than Hunt, the detective.

Our hero kept on skating, hugging the shore pretty close, so Haddock would not be apt to observe him.

At the end of five minutes it struck Lou that the stranger was also following Haddock.

"It seems to me that something is up," he muttered. "Haddock acts as though he was off on some errand of mystery, and that countryman appears to be following him. I am going to see this thing through, and find out what it all means."

Lou managed to keep the two in sight all the way up the river.

When Haddock halted and removed his skates he, like the detective, was behind a convenient clump of bushes.

"Now the countryman is going to follow Haddock, so I will follow the countryman," he thought, as he saw the boy start in the direction of the Haunted Woods.

Lou waited until the detective started on the trail, and then he took off his skates and followed.

The further he proceeded the more puzzled he became. What it all meant he could not conjecture.

On through the Haunted Woods he made his way, not being able to see Haddock at all, but keeping the man he supposed to be a countryman well in sight.

Over the frozen swampy ground he went, thinking of the paper chase, and what happened to the unlucky Will Haddock.

When the detective halted, so did he, managing it so well that he was not discovered.

Great was his surprise when he reached the little piece of solid ground in the midst of the quagmires, and beheld the shanty that was hidden from sight by the dense growth of trees and bushes.

He was not over thirty feet from the detective when he saw it, and full of wonder he watched his movements.

"He acts like anything—but a greenhorn," was Lou's thought. "I wouldn't be surprised if he is a detective in disguise."

From his position he was unable to see the front of the hut, and, of course, his gaze did not fall upon Hamilton when he conducted Tom Haddock inside.

He was compelled to lie in the bushes as quiet as a mouse, and though the air was very cold, his excitement kept him warm.

After a while he saw the detective crawl away and disappear, and a few minutes later he was astounded to see him clambering noiselessly upon the roof of the hut.

"What in the world is going to happen now?" exclaimed Lou, under his breath. "I have had several adventures since I came to Benley, but, thus far, this beats them all. I never heard of there being a shanty in these woods, and yet this one seems to have been built a long time. If that fellow on the roof don't look out he will get into trouble; that roof don't look as though it will bear much of a weight. There! he is listening now. I guess I'll get—Great Jupiter! I thought so!"

The roof had given way, and the detective was no longer in sight.

CHAPTER XXVI.

LOU DOES THE DETECTIVE A GOOD TURN.

It would be hard to say who were the most surprised, the detective or the Swamp Angels, when the roof gave way.

Hunt had not reckoned on this, and the robbers had no idea of anybody, save Tom Haddock and themselves, being in the vicinity.

The detective realized the dangerous position in which he was placed, and in the twinkling of an eye he had bounded to his feet and drawn a revolver.

"Hands up—every one of you!" he exclaimed, in as cool a tone as he could command.

The villains obeyed to a man, dropping their glasses as they did so.

Tom Haddock was rendered desperate at the thought of being captured along with a lot of thieves, and he resolved to escape, or die.

He no sooner threw his hands up than he made a dive straight between the daring detective's legs.

Hunt lost his balance and went to the floor with a thump. Before he could fire a single shot from his revolver Hamilton was upon him and had his hands pinioned.

"Get a rope!" panted the villain, whose face was as pale as a sheet. "Some of you go outside and see if there are any more out there."

A rope was soon produced, and then, while the unfortunate detective was being tied hand and foot, Haddock and a couple of the Swamp Angels went outside and made a hasty search of the premises.

Five minutes later they returned, satisfied that the man had been alone.

"That was a lucky move you made, Tom," said Hamilton, patting Haddock on the shoulder, patronizingly. "You ought to have been sharp enough not to allow the hound of the law to follow you here; but you redeemed yourself when you upset him. Pour out some rum, boys! We have had a narrow escape."

Lou Ashfield outside, concealed in the thick branches of a tree, heard every word the villain said, and he shrugged his shoulders uneasily as he thought what his fate would be if he fell into the power of the gang.

And had Tom Haddock but known that he was there, the height of his ambition would have been reached.

Meantime Hamilton ordered one of the men to patch the broken roof, and Lou watched him from his position in the tree.

He was now beginning to suffer from the cold, but he dared not descend for fear of being discovered.

At length the roof was repaired and the man went inside.

"What are you goin' ter do with this feller, cap?" asked Hank.

"Kill him, as soon as I get a little more time," was the cool reply. "It wouldn't do to let him go. We'll keep him tied here until we get through our job to-night. Haddock and I will be off now; I am going to Fenton on some business, and he can go home and make arrangements for our visit to the academy to-night. The rest of you must meet me at the outskirts of Fenton to-night at seven. I will have skates for all hands, so we can go down to the academy on the river. Bring the safe-cracking tools."

Having delivered these orders, Hamilton left the hut, Haddock following him.

Our hero watched them until they had disappeared, and then he softly slid from the tree in order to get his blood circulating more freely.

He walked away to a safe distance and beat his hands until the desired result was attained. Then he went back to the near

vicinity of the hut and sat down to wait the departure of the men.

The hours dragged slowly by, and Lou's patience was sorely tried; but at length the shades of night began to gather, and a few minutes later the Swamp Angels came out and started in the direction Hamilton and Tom Haddock had gone some time before.

By their conversation our hero became satisfied that the detective was alone in the hut.

He waited fifteen minutes, so as to be sure the villains had gone for good, and then, crawling from his place of concealment, made for the door.

It was not locked, so he pushed it open and boldly entered.

It was now quite dark, and the smoldering fire in the rough fireplace made little or no light.

The boy struck a match, and, holding it above his head, discerned the form of the detective lying in a corner.

"Hello!" exclaimed Lou; "I have come to set you free."

Bending over the man, he saw that he was not only bound but gagged.

Out came his pocket knife, and two minutes later Hunt was free.

"Thank you," said he. "How came you here?"

Lou told him in a very few words.

"You were more successful in trailing your man than I, it seems. I am glad you came, for if you had not the chances are it would have been the end of me. I suppose you recognize me by my voice?"

"Yes; you are the detective I met at Col. Cleverton's," retorted Lou.

"I am, sure enough. Are you armed?"

"No."

"Well, we will hunt around the shanty; perhaps we can find something."

Lighting a lantern that hung from a nail, they made a search.

There were plenty of weapons in a closet, and they soon selected what they wanted.

"Now we will be off to prevent the robbery at the academy," said Hunt. "We will let them enter the building, and then capture the whole lot, that rascal of a boy included."

"I did not know Tom Haddock was as bad as he is," observed our hero. "I know he hates me enough to kill me, but I hardly believed he would league himself with a lot of cutthroats."

"The chances are that he will spend a few of his years in the penitentiary, and that may do him good."

Once out of the swamp the two made all possible speed for the river, and, putting on their skates at this point, started for the village of Benley.

"I'll have to get a couple of constables to help us," said Hunt. "Then we will go straight to the academy and notify Prof. Haggard, without letting young Haddock know anything about it."

"You know what is best to do," replied Lou.

It was a little late when they reached the village, on account of Hunt skating into an air hole and nearly getting drowned. If it had not been for our hero, in fact, he would surely have perished.

This accident necessitated a delay, for the detective was compelled to go to the house of the colonel for dry clothes.

It was after eleven o'clock when the two constables were ready to accompany them to the academy, and Lou was afraid they might be too late.

"We'll git there in time, never fear," said one of the constables, who was driving the horse that was hitched to the rickety spring wagon they were in. "Robbers don't do business afore twelve o'clock."

Luck seemed to be against them, for the wagon broke down half a mile from the academy, and they were forced to get out and walk.

"It is twelve o'clock!" exclaimed Hunt; "we have got to hurry, if we are going to catch the gang."

The four quickened their pace into a run.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHAT HADDOCK DID.

Tom Haddock made his way back to the academy, feeling that the time for his revenge was close at hand.

The more he thought over it the more determined he became that Lou Ashfield should die that night.

When he reached his room he sat down and began to study out an improvement on Hamilton's plan.

At length he arose, and, with flushed face and clinched teeth, he muttered:

"If Hitcher did not room with Ashfield it would be easy enough. I could then sneak in and stab my enemy, and the deed would be laid to the robbers. By Jove! I never thought of it. Ashfield was sent to his room to stay all day! I wonder if he is there yet? Maybe the professor has let up on him, and he is out now. Anyhow, I didn't see him on the river, or in the schoolroom when I came back. I guess I'll take a look over the partition."

Like a snake creeping upon its prey, the young villain clambered over the partition and dropped noiselessly into the next room.

The next was the one occupied by our hero and Harry Hitcher, and, placing a chair in position, he cautiously peered over into the room.

To his great joy, he beheld what appeared to be a human figure asleep in one of the beds.

"He has got tired of his solitude and gone to sleep," thought the wicked boy. "Now, if I only dared, I could creep in there and finish him. By gracious! I will never have a better chance than this. I must do it!"

Drawing from his pocket a wicked-looking knife, which had been given to him by Hank, the robber, he opened the blade and tested its sharpness.

An exultant exclamation, which sounded as though it might have come from a fiend, left his lips.

"I can't lose this opportunity," he muttered. "If Lou Ashfield remains asleep until I reach his bedside my revenge will be accomplished, and Myers will get the rest of the money and divide with me. Here goes anyhow!"

Drawing himself up as silently as a cat could have done it, he reached the top of the partition, and then, with bated breath, lowered himself into our hero's room.

Once there the would-be murderer began to tremble like a leaf. His teeth chattered, and a feeling of faintness came over him.

He was about to stab to the heart one who, by odds, was the favorite of the school.

By an extraordinary effort he shook off the feeling and started on tiptoe for the bedside.

He could hear nothing save the beating of his own heart as he opened the blade and clinched the handle of the murderous weapon tightly in his hand.

Fixing his eyes upon the spot where Lou's heart ought to be, he nerved himself to commit the deed.

The next instant the knife darted downward with all the strength he could command.

With a subdued cry of fear, he left it sticking there, and with a bound, scrambled over the partition.

He did not stop till he reached his own room, and then, throwing himself on the floor, he hid his face in his hands.

For several minutes he remained thus, when with great beads of perspiration gathered on his brow, he struggled to a chair.

The awful nature of the crime he had committed partially dazed him, and it was fully half an hour before Tom Haddock felt anything like himself again.

"I must have killed him instantly," he muttered. "Now, I must no longer remain an inmate of the academy, for there are those here who will lay the murder to me, and it will be hard to prove my innocence. I will stick it out until the professor is robbed to-night, and then I will leave with the Swamp Angels and cast my lot with them. Anyhow, the death of my poor brother is now avenged."

As the young villain uttered the last sentence some of the old fire shot from his eyes, and he appeared to be as cool as ever.

A couple of minutes later he left his room and went downstairs, going past the professor's private room as he made his way out of doors.

"There is the safe in the corner," he thought. "I will fix it so my friends can get in the room without any trouble; they will have to do the rest without my assistance."

The majority of the boys were on the river when Haddock went down, among them Harry Hitcher and Scofield and Dixon, who looked at him in anything but a friendly way.

But he paid no attention to them, and putting on his skates, prepared to pass away the time until nightfall.

He knew the murder would not be discovered until the servant went up with Lou's supper, and even then it might not become known unless he tried to arouse the boy, as it would be quite dark by that time.

Haddock did not get back to the academy until a minute or two before the bell for supper rang.

He had imbibed enough whiskey at Fenton to nerve him for anything that might happen, and when he heard the professor order Lou's supper taken up to him he showed not the least concern.

It was not much that he ate, however, until the servant returned and reported that Ashfield was lying in bed, and refused to say whether he wanted his supper or not.

"If he is sulking, let him remain where he is until morning," said Prof. Haggard. "Hitcher, you can sleep in one of the empty rooms to-night. If I hear of any of you climbing over the partitions into his room I'll punish you severely."

"I am all right now," thought Haddock, and he felt so easy that he cracked a joke with the boy next to him.

The hours passed slowly enough after the evening meal, and after he retired there was no danger in Haddock falling asleep and failing to do as he had promised the robbers.

About eleven o'clock he arose and made his way softly downstairs. He had discovered that the key to his room fitted the lock on the door of the professor's private office, and with the stealth of an old burglar he unlocked the door and went in.

It was as dark as pitch, and Haddock took the risk of striking a match.

The professor slept in the room directly overhead, and the least noise might awaken him.

Like a cat the boy made his way to the safe in the corner. "I can't see how they are going to open this thing very quickly," he thought, as he placed his hand on the knob of the heavy steel door.

Great was his surprise when the door swung open. Prof. Haggard had forgotten to lock it.

"Whew!" he exclaimed under his breath. "Hank and Mike will have an easy thing of it. I wonder how much money the old man has in here, anyhow?"

The boy knelt and was about to rifle the contents of the safe, when it occurred to him that there was a possibility of his being caught.

He gave up the idea immediately and softly left the room. Carefully unlocking the front door of the building, he went out into the darkness of the night.

There was not a particle of wind blowing, and it was moderating.

"A forerunner of rain," muttered Tom. "Well, let it come." Buttoning his coat tightly about him, and pulling his cap well down over his face, he started down the hill in the direction of the boathouse.

He sat down in the shadow of the building, and indulging in a chew of tobacco, prepared to await the coming of his friends.

Twenty minutes passed and the click of skates on the ice came to his ears.

"They are on time!" he exclaimed, rising to his feet. "Now for the robbery!"

A minute later and Hamilton and the gang of Swamp Angels met him at the bank.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FOILED!

"Hello, Tom!" Hamilton whispered; "is everything all right?" "Yes," was the reply, "things could not be in a better shape. Even the safe is open for you, and Lou Ashfield is dead!"

"What!" gasped the astonished villain; "do you mean that, Tom Haddock?"

"I certainly do; but hush; it makes me shudder to think of it." "You settled his hash, then?"

"I did. There was no mistake about it this time," and the youthful villain spoke with an air of satisfaction.

"You are certainly a good one, Tom!" exclaimed Hamilton, as he slapped the boy on the back. "But come! we must attend to the business that brought us here."

After five minutes had been spent in whispered instructions the robbers and their young accomplice began sneaking softly toward the academy.

"I am going to leave with you," observed Tom Haddock, in a whisper, as he made his way along at Hamilton's side.

"If you do suspicion will surely rest upon you for killing Ashfield," returned the villain, in the same tone.

"I don't care about that; I am going, anyway."

"As you please, then. I have no doubt but that you will make a good one in our business."

Hamilton stationed a man at each corner of the building, and then deputized Hank and Mike to follow Haddock inside and make the haul.

Everything worked nicely. Not a sound broke the stillness of the night.

In less than fifteen minutes the robbers had ransacked the safe, taking several thousand dollars from it, which the professor had saved since paying off the mortgage his property had been incumbered with at first.

Just as Tom Haddock got out of the door with the villains a startling thing occurred.

A stern voice ordered them to throw up their hands and remain stock still in their tracks.

It was Detective Hunt who gave the command. He and our hero had arrived but five minutes before, with the constables, and during that short time they had made prisoners of the four men who were on guard at each corner of the building.

There was a leveled revolver in the hand of the bold detective as he faced Haddock and his two Swamp Angel friends, and at his side stood Lou Ashfield, he also with a revolver.

Tom gazed at the boy he thought to be lying a corpse in his room for the space of ten seconds, and then, with a scream of terror that sounded like a cry such as a wild man might make, he took to his heels in the direction of the river.

That it was the ghost of our hero he thought without a doubt, and his one desire was to get away from the spot.

He never once thought of the weapons that had been leveled at him. The muzzle of a revolver was nothing compared to the ghost of the boy he had murdered a few hours before, and, for the time being, he forgot everything—in fact, he hardly knew that he existed.

On he ran until— Plump! He landed squarely into the arms of Hamilton on the river bank.

"What's up?" asked the villain, in a voice of alarm.

"I—I—I saw a—a—a ghost!" stammered Haddock. "It——"

At that moment a pistol shot rang out.

"Come, put on your skates!" exclaimed Hamilton. "It was no ghost that fired that shot. The boys are in trouble. If you want to escape with me, hurry!"

With nervous haste the pair clamped on their skates and went skimming over the frozen surface.

Crack! crack! Two more shots were fired.

"They have been caught!" cried Hamilton.

"Yes, I know," faltered Haddock, who was partially regaining his senses.

"You know!" echoed his companion. "What do you mean, Haddock?"

"Don't say any more till we get safe away. All I know is that the ghost of Lou Ashfield and a man are after us."

The ring of steel striking the ice prevented anything more being said. A skater was approaching.

The two prepared to make a spurt, when the voice of Mike, the robber, called to them:

"Don't leave me, cap. Ther rest are bagged, an' it'll be some little time afore ther officers kin git skates to foller us on ther ice. A bad night's work, cap, I kin tell you."

"How did it happen, anyhow?" asked the captain, in a tone that showed he felt anything but happy.

"It was ther boy that Haddock claims to have settled that did the most of ther business. He is ther liveliest corpse I ever tackled. He knocked Hank senseless ther minute Haddock started to run, an' then I managed to upset ther man with him an' light out. Ther rest of our gang is gobbled, for I heard one of ther officers say, 'all but three,' an' then they fired at me two or three times. There's about a dozen officers there, an' Lou Ashfield is at ther head."

Tom Haddock could not believe it was any other than Lou's ghost he saw, but he did not stop to argue the question there.

At length they reached the spot where they were compelled to take off their skates, and then, like frightened foxes, they made for the hidden shanty.

When they reached it they were almost breathless, and sank down upon the floor to recover.

After a while Hamilton arose and lighted a match.

The jug of whiskey was the first thing his eyes lighted upon, and in a twinkling he seized it.

Mike and Haddock quickly scrambled to their feet, and then three bumpers were poured out.

"I feel better now," said Hamilton, smacking his lips. "Now, to get square on what has happened to us this night, we will carve the fellow we left tied up in the corner."

A simultaneous cry of dismay came from the lips of the villains as they gazed into the corner.

As the reader knows, Hunt was not there.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PROFESSOR IS DECORATED.

It was a lucky thing that there were to be no more studies at the academy that week. The boys were too much excited over what had taken place to put their minds upon their books.

It was quite late Friday morning when the bell rang for breakfast, and when the scholars filed into the dining-room the professor was not in his accustomed place.

But presently he came in, walking with a very unsteady gait.

"Good-morning, boys!" he exclaimed. "I am glad to see you—hic—looking so well."

"He's been having a night of it," Harry whispered to Lou; "he's been celebrating the capture of the thieves."

"I guess you are right," was our hero's rejoinder. "Let us have a little fun with him. He surely won't get mad to-day."

The old man sank into his chair as though he was very weary, and then, being unable to stand the pressure any longer, shut his eyes and began to snore.

This evoked a shout of laughter from the boys, but the professor heeded it not; he was tightly clasped in the arms of Morpheus.

The assistant teachers always ate with the boys as well as the professor, but for some strange reason they were conspicuous by their absence this morning.

"Fellows," said Lou, "go on and finish your breakfast. When you are through we will have a lark."

The boys gave a subdued cheer, and then pitched into the eatables before them, as though their lives depended upon it.

Now that Tom Haddock was gone, there was not a boy at the academy who would play the part of a sneak, so our hero had no fears of being exposed.

"I want two bottles of ink—one red and the other black," he exclaimed.

Scofield and Dixon immediately sprang from their chairs and made for the schoolroom to procure the articles.

In a very short time they returned with them.

Lou had eaten all he desired by this time, and taking the ink, he approached the sleeping man.

In a quiet, off-handed manner he proceeded to dot the professor's bald head with red and black spots.

Then he started on his forehead, and did not cease until he had his entire face covered with spots the size of the corks of the bottles.

"It will come off easily enough," said he. "No—when he awakes, don't any of you laugh."

But the victim of our hero's joke did not appear to be in a hurry to awake.

The truth of the matter was that he had not been in bed since the robbers were captured.

He felt so elated at saving his money, when he was awakened by the uproar and told what had happened, that he called his assistants to his office to have a glass of wine with him.

The first glass was not enough, so they had some more, and still more, until finally daylight was at hand.

Shortly before the breakfast bell rang the assistants dropped off to sleep on the floor, and straightening himself the best he could, the professor put on a dignified look and repaired to the dining-room.

And now he, too, was fast asleep.

The boys did their best to arouse him, but it was no use.

After a while they desisted and left the room.

Lou and Hitcher went out of doors.

The temperature had risen several degrees and a disagreeable rain was falling.

"If this keeps up the ice will leave about as quick as it came," remarked Harry.

"Yes," returned Lou. "What are we going to do with ourselves to-day, anyhow?"

"I don't know, I am sure. Hello! here comes a team. Some one to see the professor, I'll wager!"

Sure enough, a span of horses attached to a covered wagon was approaching.

As they came to a halt a man sprang from the vehicle and hastened toward the boys.

It was Hunt, the detective.

"Hello, Lou!" said he, familiarly. "I want you to take a ride with me to the hut in the swamp. Will you go?"

"Yes," replied our hero; "but before I do I want to introduce you to Prof. Haggard. He is desirous of thanking you for what you did for him last night."

"Certainly," and the detective followed the two boys into the building.

Straight into the dining-room they led him, and then, without cracking a smile, Lou introduced Hunt to the still sleeping professor.

The roar of laughter that left the detective's lips aroused the old man. He staggered to his feet, and after looking sternly at his visitor demanded to know what was the matter with him.

"Beg pardon, professor," interrupted Lou. "This gentleman is Mr. Hunt, the detective, who arrested the robbers last night."

"Oh, ah—yes," was the stammering reply. "Glad to see you, sir. Sit down and have a drink."

"Thank you, but I haven't time just now. I came to get young Ashfield to go with me to the Haunted Woods on some particular business. I suppose you are willing that he should go with me?"

"Certainly—certainly, sir," and the ink-spotted face smiled approvingly. "Ashfield can do anything he pleases to-day."

"It seems so," said Hunt, *sotto voce*, as he gazed at the professor's decorated head and face. Then aloud he added:

"Well, good morning, professor. We must be off now."

Lou followed him outside and got into the wagon, where he found the two constables who had assisted them the night before, and Hank, the Swamp Angel, who was handcuffed and under their charge.

"We are taking him along to lead us through the dangerous places in the swamp," said Hunt, in answer to our hero's questioning look.

A minute later the wagon drove off through the rain.

It was well past ten o'clock when they reached that part of the woods where it was necessary to leave the wagon and proceed on foot.

"You lead the way to the hut, and be careful about it," said Hunt to his prisoner. "I'll take off the bracelets, so as to give you a little better chance."

"All right," was the response. "There's no danger of me runnin' away; this ain't one of ther best places ter tempt anything like that."

Hank started, with the detective close at his heels, revolver in hand, and after him came the rest.

The captive robber led them direct to the shanty, without looking behind him once.

"They had sense enough ter leave, I see," remarked Hank as he took a careful survey of his surroundings. "Now, gents, ther place where we used ter stow ther things we swiped are under ther floor an' in that big box in ther corner there. A board has been taken from ther floor an' ther box is open, so 'tain't likely they've left much behind 'em."

"I'll put the bracelets on you again, and we'll take a look," exclaimed the detective. "Hold out your hands, please."

The man did so, because there was no other course for him to pursue, and the click that followed made him a helpless prisoner again.

Then Lou and his companions proceeded to make a careful search of the place.

As Hunt tore another board from the floor an exultant cry left his lips.

He had discovered the silver plate that Col. Cleverton was so anxious to regain possession of.

"I know they wouldn't take that," said Hank. "We were afraid to do anything with that stuff after we got it. Ther law-hounds were after us too hot. We used ther money we got all right enough, though."

Lou and one of the constables turned their attention to the box in the corner.

It appeared to be empty, save a few torn newspapers, but as the boy removed these he found a huge red leather pocketbook lying in the bottom.

"That belonged to ther captain," spoke up Hank, as our hero took the article out. "He must have dropped it 'thout knowin' it, for I've heerd him say there was a valuable paper in it."

"We will see what there is in it when we get back to Benley," observed Lou. "How are you making out, Mr. Hunt? Anything more under the floor?"

"Not a thing," was the reply. "I am quite satisfied at finding this silver plate. The colonel will have his mind at ease now."

They rummaged about for half an hour longer, but could find nothing that amounted to anything save the silver plate and the pocketbook.

"I think we'd better set fire ter this shanty, so it will never harbor another gang of thieves," said one of the constables, with a questioning glance at the detective.

"As you please," was the retort.

The man set to work with a will, and in five minutes had piled enough paper and other combustible matter in a corner to do the business.

A match was then applied to it, and then all hands went out into the storm.

It was past noon when Lou was landed at the academy, and when he got inside he was promptly met by Harry Hitcher, Scofield and Dixon.

"How did you make out?" they asked in concert.

"Pretty fair," was the reply. "Hunt found Col. Cleverton's stolen silver plate, and I discovered the pocketbook of the captain of the Swamp Angels, which I turned over to the detective. That was all there was to be found, and before we came away the constables set fire to the shanty."

"Well," said Hitcher, "there has been some fun here while you were gone. The professor got sobered up and went into his private office, where he found Lemons and the other teachers stretched out on the floor sound asleep. He kicked them till they were forced to get upon their feet, and then discharged them for getting drunk and setting a bad example for the scholars. They haven't gone yet, though, and he may change his mind."

"How about the ink?"

"Oh, he found that out, too, and laid it to the teachers. That is one reason why he discharged them."

"I will see him and tell him about it, so he will relent on the assistants and re-engage them," said Lou.

"It was great fun, wasn't it?" exclaimed Scofield. "I don't know what we would do if you were to leave school, Lou."

"It isn't likely that I shall leave old Benley until I graduate. But how about dinner? I am as hungry as a bear!"

"The cook promised to save something for you," said Hitcher. "I gave her a quarter, so don't tip her again."

Lou laughed, and then made his way to the dining-room.

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCLUSION.

Lou tried to get an audience with Prof. Haggard after he had finished his dinner, but the old man refused him admission.

Toward night the rain ceased falling, and as Lou put on his coat to go out he was surprised to receive notice that the coach of Col. Cleverton was in waiting to drive him to the house of the colonel.

Daggs informed him of this, and then handed him a note.

It was from Hunt, and the contents were brief, and as follows:

"Come at once; a surprise awaits you."

Our hero got into the coach without asking permission of the professor, and he was quickly whirled to the colonel's handsome residence.

He was met by Hunt and Hazel Cleverton, the latter welcoming him with a sweet smile.

The detective hurried him to the library, where the colonel was seated, smoking a cigar.

"I have startling news for you," observed Hunt. "In the first place, Tom Haddock and the two thieves are dead—"

"What!" gasped the boy; "dead, did you say?"

"Yes; they were killed in a railroad smash-up this morning. They were stealing a ride to Boston on a freight train, which came in collision with an express, and, strange to say, they were the only ones killed. I went over to the morgue and identified them myself."

This hardly seemed possible, and Lou could not realize that it was true for some minutes.

But it was true, nevertheless, and thus the wicked Hamilton and his young pupil had met a just reward, along with their ignorant associate, Mike, the Swamp Angel.

Hunt accepted the cigar the colonel tendered him, and then produced the pocketbook Lou had found in the box in the shanty.

"Ashfield," said he, "did you ever see the will your father made?"

"Yes," returned the boy, much mystified at the question.

"Did you ever think it peculiar that he should place Theodore Johnson, your uncle, as your guardian?"

"Well, yes; father and he were not on the best of terms before he died. But I suppose it must be all right."

"Well, it isn't all right. Your father never made the will Johnson holds; here is the will he made. The other was a forgery!"

With distended eyes Lou listened to the reading of the genuine document, which the reader knows had been stolen from his uncle's office by Hamilton.

"My uncle Theodore must be a villain!" he managed to say, after a while.

"I should think he was a villain. It was he who hired this scoundrel, Hamilton, to come here and make way with you. Here are the papers that prove it. They were found in the pocketbook you took from the box in the old shanty."

Our hero was staggered when he heard all this, but he was forced to believe it.

"According to the forged will, if you were to die before you became twenty-one your uncle would come in for your property. Can you see it now, my boy?" asked the colonel.

"I can!" exclaimed Lou. "I shall leave for home at once, and when I have established my claim I will give my uncle forty-eight hours to get out of the country."

"It will hardly be necessary for you to do all that, since I have already sent a telegram, and it is quite probable that your uncle is under arrest by this time. It is my business to look after evil-doers, you know."

"And I have telegraphed to the gentleman who is your real guardian, and who is a warm friend of mine, that you and I will meet him at his office Monday morning," added the colonel.

"Thank you for your kindness," was all our hero could say.

But little more remains to be told.

Suffice it to say that the wrong Lou's uncle had done him was quickly righted, and that scheming scoundrel committed suicide while awaiting trial.

Hank, the robber, was sent to prison along with the rest of the Swamp Angels, but his sentence was a much lighter one, owing to the interference of Detective Hunt.

Tom Haddock's remains were buried in the cemetery near the village of Benley, at his father's request, but the grave has never been marked by a stone.

Reginald Munsey became friendly toward Lou, and no longer aspired to the hand of the fair Hazel Cleverton.

Prof. Haggard kept his assistants in his employ, and put his money in the bank ever after.

Harry Hitcher graduated at the same time Lou did, and when the two left Benley Academy to go to Yale, it was with feelings of regret.

They had many warm friends there, but none warmer than Scofield and Dixon.

Daggs, the man of all work, fairly cried when the boys left, but a couple of pieces of silver soon pacified him.

Probably some day you may read in the papers of the marriage of Lou and Hazel Cleverton, for at last reports they were engaged.

THE END.

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